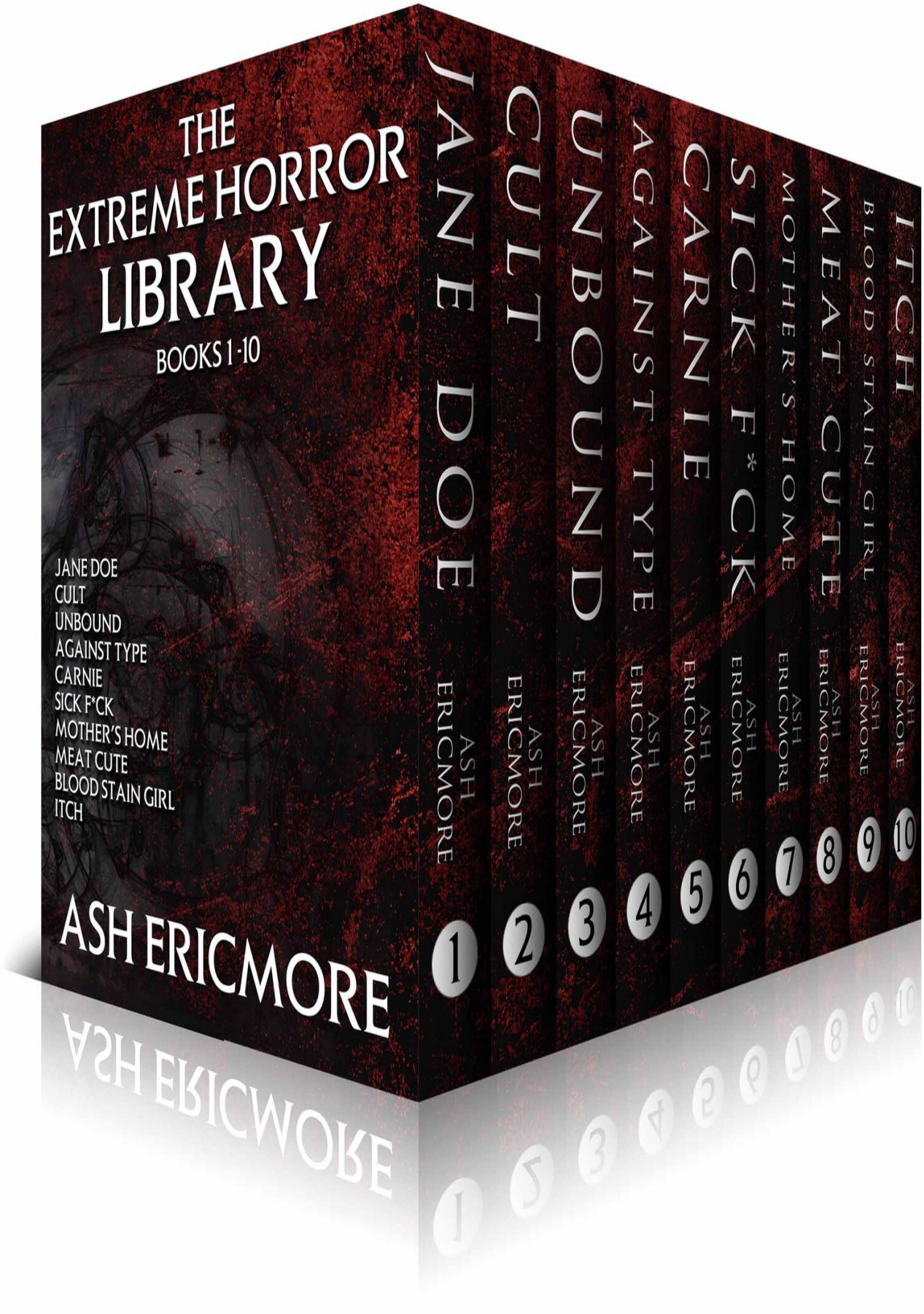

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THE EXTREME HORROR LIBRARY

ASH ERICMORE

AN OMNIBUS OF EXTREME HORROR NOVELLAS

Written by: Ash Ericmore

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JANE DOE
CULT
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MOTHER’S HOME
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ITCH

J A N E D O E

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

There was the guy that had just come out of the station. He had a determined gait to his walk. Short sleeved shirt. Blue suit trousers. Glasses. Looked like he had just come off shift at some teaching hospital. He walked straight by the taxi and crossed the street.

He got into a car parked on the other side of the road and kissed the girl sat in there waiting for him. Gordon had been watching her earlier. Watching her surreptitiously, wondering if she was the one. She had that mousey blond hair that always looked kind of dirty, but probably wasn't. She wasn't wearing makeup, but it was only five in the morning so she probably had just gotten out of bed to come and pick this schmuck up. Still, *he* seemed happy. There was a laugh, a touch, and then the engine started, the lights went on, and they pulled away.

Gordon returned his look to the doorway of the station. *Oh, come on*, he thought. There had to be some business this morning. He'd gotten here just before four so that he could catch anyone getting off the paper train. Sure, there was that one kid who looked about sixteen and was clearly coming down from something that he had taken last night, but no. He was a walker. Came out of the station and lit a fag the first chance he got. Staggered a bit, too. He weaved his way off in the direction of the town. Probably looking for the first opening café. Somewhere he could get his head—and his story—straight before heading home to his folks, sitting there wondering why little Johnny hadn't come home last night from the concert that he went to with his friends. Gordon smiled to himself. That was probably some nasty gig in Brixton, that he went to on his own, met some nonce that plied him with bad weed—or E, if he was lucky—and now he finds his way home on the paper train with no memory whatsoever of what happened last night. And odd bits of him hurt. But he probably believes the band were good.

Might not even have played.

Who knows?

The kid stumbled in the road, putting his hand out as if to stop a car that wasn't there from hitting him, before stooping down to retrieve the cigarette that he dropped and thrust it back into his mouth.

Maybe … Gordon had shook his head and once again turned back to the station. *No*. Enough of thoughts like that. Let him go about his business.

The rumble of another train shook through the seat of his pants and snapped Gordon back to the here and now. He arched his back to look out to the side of the station building. The lights of train carriages came into view and slowed, as it got nearer the platform. It was a passenger train from London by the look of it. First one of the day. There wasn't much need of commuter trains from London to here. Birchingate—a rundown seaside town on the ghost-coast of Kent. No jobs here. But still they ran, and still they carried people. A few weeks ago Gordon had picked up a young woman from this very train. She came out of the station looking like she was just getting out of the shower. Dressed very inappropriately for travel. Too much skin and not enough clothing. She had a shoulder bag, one of those massive things that look like they can hold the kitchen sink and the bath as well. Flip flops. Can you fucking believe it? She came straight over and got in the taxi before Gordon had found time to turn off the passenger sign on the roof and gotten into the backseat without so much as a question. Gordon was left a little gobsmacked, to be honest.

She slung her bag in first, and slumped half naked onto the seat. "Beach," she had said. Not even a *please*. It was barely light, too. Gordon wasn't interested in the fare, but he wanted even less to start anything by trying to tell her he couldn't take her, so he turned the engine over and drove down the high street to the bottom of the hill and pulled to a stop. It wasn't more than a mile and she could have walked it in minutes, but he guessed that she wanted to get in early and get a spot.

Stupid sunbathers.

He'd charged her four pounds fifty, and when the look on her face changed, realising how expensive it was, he just added on the end, *minimum fare*. She looked plenty pissed but had started to dig around in her bag by that point anyway, so he turned back and returned his focus to the road. It

was empty. You couldn't see the beach from there, you had to go down an alleyway and then down a flight of stairs to get to the beach, but it was just after five in the morning. It was going to be empty. She thrust a fiver at him over the seat and left her hand there, hanging, waiting for change. The cheek. He slipped her fifty pence and she got out without another word, slamming the door. He remembered thinking that he really ought to find out what the minimum fare was, because at some point someone was going to challenge him.

He still hadn't found out. He must do that.

The doors of the station opened, and Gordon watched to see if there might be any takers. The first one out was some geezer in a suit. Looked about thirty, but judging by the bulk under the tight fabric he could have been older. He looked like he spent too long in the gym. Had one of those military haircuts and hadn't shaved. Probably called all the girls in the club darling and all the boys son before trying to nail the seventeen year old that had gotten in with a dodgy ID.

Gordon rested his finger near the passenger light switch, ready to flick it off. He didn't want the fare.

But the geezer half-heartedly held the door for someone behind him. It was a woman. She strode out with purpose behind him. He let the door go just a split second too early, as if to appear polite, but actually got a win in his mind. One over on her. He had probably tried it on when they were on the train together and she'd shot him down.

Well, that's how it worked out in Gordon's mind, anyway.

He moved his finger a little away from the switch. The geezer was walking away from the door, still in his direction and the last thing he wanted or needed was to let this guy get the idea into his head that he was getting in the back. But equally … he looked by him to the woman.

She was a different story.

And there was no way that he was letting her go. Gordon watched her. She took the door in her stride, catching it as if she half expected this douche-canoe to drop it in her face, and then she came out behind him, letting the door go herself and looking up and down the car park. Was she

looking for someone? That would be a shame. A real shame. *Maybe,* Gordon thought, *just maybe she's looking for a taxi.*

He withdrew his hand from the switch entirely. He had to take his chance with the guy. He was still striding like he owned the place, trying to look bigger than he was. And now *she* had seen Gordon's passenger light and let out a little smile and started towards him.

Gordon's eyes flicked from the guy to the woman and back again. He was praying silently that this insufferable prick didn't open the rear door of the car. What could he do if he did? He'd have to take the fare and lose the girl. And that would suck balls.

He bit his lip as the guy came up level with the car and he closed his eyes. If there was a God, please, he'd never asked for anything before—he'd never ask for anything again—just let this arrogant, stupid looking, jacked-up, dickwad pass on by.

Gordon waited.

Waited.

Nothing happened. No door. No sound. No dickwad.

Gordon opened his eyes and looked in the passenger side wing mirror. He could see dickwad's arse wiggling down the little hill to the main road.

Half had a heart attacked when the woman pulled the door open and slid in. She dropped her arse down onto the seat first and then slid her legs in. Proper lady-like. Gordon looked in the mirror. He could see her lips. Deep red. Her mouth looked expensive.

She closed the door with a light click. The gentle touch.

"Where can I take you?" Gordon turned the engine over before flicking the passenger light off. He looked back into the mirror at her lips. She pulled the belt across the front of her.

"Rochester Road," she said. "L.J. Forts, and Sons." Her voice was sex line operator smooth. He immediately knew why dickwad had thrown his hat in the ring.

Gordon nodded. He knew Rochester Road well. It was the main drag between a couple of the larger towns in the district. Not far from here.

Twenty minutes at most. He dropped the car into reverse and pulled it around in the car park, driving down to the main road and turning right. There wasn't any real traffic at this time. He saw dickwad looking through the window of a closed newsagent. Loser.

"You meeting someone there?" Gordon asked as he drove up to a stop on a set of traffic lights.

"I have questions that need answers and I wanted to do it in person."

Gordon looked at the clock on the dash. It was still only just after five-thirty. He frowned. "They opening up for you?"

"I didn't know how long it would take to get there."

Gordon raised an eyebrow, and then twisted in his seat, raising his arm over the passenger seat to turn and look at her. "It's only going to take a few minutes," he said. "You'll be waiting on the street corner for a couple of hours like some hooker." He looked down her body. She didn't look like a hooker. She was … perfect.

"Green," she said.

He returned his eyes to her face. "Huh?"

"The lights have turned green."

Gordon stared at her for a second and then shuffled back around in his seat. "Right," he said, dropping the car into gear. "I was just saying that I would have you there in a few minutes, and perhaps you wouldn't want to stand on the street for a couple of hours."

"And what other activity do you suggest I partake in?"

She sounded posh, but not London posh. Gordon couldn't quite put his finger on where it was. It wasn't northern. That wouldn't do, anyway. He would have just dumped her on Rochester and headed back to the station. It wasn't foreign either. It was on the tip of his tongue. "Look, there's a nice café on Rochester. *Bean There*." He chuckled to himself. Got him every time. "Geddit?" He glanced in the mirror in time to catch her ryely raise the corner of her mouth.

"Very good," she said quietly. "Fine. As long as they sell coffee."

Gordon shook his head. “What café don’t sell coffee?” He let the question hang. He wasn’t really expecting an answer anyway. He took the first left at the next roundabout and went by ASDA—the car park was deserted. “I remember when that was twenty-four hour.” If he didn’t keep up the banter she’d get suspicious. Left at the next roundabout and through a housing estate to a set of traffic lights. “This is Rochester Road,” he said, glancing back at her mouth. The lights changed and he turned left again.

Soon enough, *Bean There* was on the right and Gordon pulled over. He stopped outside and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Huh.” The café was shrouded in complete darkness. He scratched the back of his head, feigning confusion. “Well.”

Bean There had been closed down three weeks ago by the Food Standards. The local rag had a Facebook page and on there they had reported that it had been closed down due to ongoing food preparation concerns. In the comments someone had said that they were there when a little old lady had seen a rat on the floor under the table. Someone else said that they spat in the food. Someone else had intimated something unsavoury about their mayonnaise. But whatever the reason, the FSA had stomped in wearing their jack boots and closed the place down.

He turned in his seat. “Sorry, Love. They appear to be closed.” He looked at her again and tried his most pitiful face. “Look,” he said. “I only live around the corner. I have coffee.” He nodded towards the houses. “I live on the estate. I feel like I led you astray. How about you come back to my place and have a coffee—no extra charge.”

She frowned and sucked air in through her mouth and then breathed it out through her nose as she stared at back at him. He couldn’t read the look and thought she might say no. *Banter your way out of it, man*. “No funny business mind,” he continued. “I’m not that kind of boy.”

She smiled and let out a small laugh.

It was sweet.

“Okay then. I’ll try to restrain myself,” she said.

He threw her a wink and twisted back to face front, pulling the car back out onto the empty road.

C H A P T E R 2

It was still not six in the morning and the car was idling in his driveway. Gordon turned the engine off and got out of the car. He waited to see if the woman was going to get out by herself or if she was going to wait for him to open the door like a common chauffeur. He tossed the keys in the air and caught them again without moving and that seemed to be all the indication that she needed.

The door opened from the inside and the woman got out carrying the purse and document case she had with her. Gordon smiled warmly. This was the first time he had been able to look at her without having his view interrupted. She was slender, but not thin. Had on a business suit—dark purple. She had dark red hair. Gordon was a simple man, and he liked what he saw. She was just right.

He turned back to the house and went over and opened the front door. Listening, he could hear her follow.

"You have a nice house," she said, gaining ground on him as he fingered the keys.

He did, yes. The estate itself was tawdry. It had been a shitty council estate in the sixties and sold off, piece meal, in the eighties. *The Newingstairs Estate*. It had a rep. Largely, it was row upon row of organised two up, two downs with small back gardens and even smaller front ones. Most of the front ones had been turned into driveways just long enough to get a Fiesta on there or some other trash heap that cost less than a grand and probably had no tax, or insurance in it. Most of them probably didn't know what an MOT was.

It was a haven of the unemployed. Drug addicts. Kid factories. All playing the local job centre for as much benefit as they could screw out of them.

But Gordon's house was different. A few years back he had secured the property in a nice little deal for a good price. No one wanted to live there. Surrounded by … this. It was the last house in the close and detached. The

only one like it. It had a large front garden when he'd bought it with a garage to the side. He had quickly converted the garden into a drive in, drive out, driveway. Super posh, like. He rarely found the need to use the garage these days, but he could still pull in there and work on the car if he needed to.

The house was double fronted and rendered, painted white. Compared to the rest of the street—with kiddies trikes discarded to the side of the road and even the stereotypical sofa in the front garden in one house—it was a mansion.

"Keeps the rain off," he said, smiling to himself. He opened the door and stood to the side to allow the woman to pass him. She stepped in through the front door and he took his opportunity to drop his nose as close to her as he dare and take a whiff. The perfume wasn't cheap. But not to his taste.

But it would wash off.

Gordon held his keys up towards the car and pressed the button. The dark blue Mondeo beeped once as it locked and then he followed her into the house and closed the door behind her. She stood in the hallway at the bottom of the stairs clutching her bag in front of her. Gordon smiled and held his hand up to guide her into the kitchen: through the door to the back of the house.

She obliged and Gordon followed her through, gently closing the kitchen door behind them and waving her over to the table, to sit.

"Thank you," she said, taking her seat. "My name is Jane." She tagged the words on with a tick of uncomfortableness in her voice.

"How rude of me." Gordon turned to the kettle and flipped it on. "Gordon. It's nice to meet you." He took the few steps across the kitchen and to the table and thrust his hand towards her. She took it. She had a firm grip. "So what do you do?" he asked, turning back to the cabinets and busying himself with making coffee.

She started saying something about increasing annual blah-blah, but Gordon tuned out. He got down a couple of mugs and spooned in some Nescafe. "Milk and sugar?" He interrupted her.

She stopped talking for a second, thrown from her spiel. “Oh, yes. One please.” She was quiet for only a couple of seconds before starting up again.

Gordon picked up a sugar cube with his fingers from the open bowl of them on the counter and dropped one into her mug. Then he took the milk from the waist high fridge next to the sink and slopped some in. Again, only into her mug. Then he opened the cutlery drawer and took out a spoon and a tablet, dropping both of them into her mug.

Click.

The kettle rumbled as the water rolled, and turned itself off. Gordon filled both of the mugs and stirred them. He took hers over to the table and placed it in front of her, and then retreated to his on the counter. It was best to stay a safe, passive, distance from her. He didn’t want to be too forward, or too confining. He didn’t want to spook her. He leaned against the counter and lifted his own coffee to his lips and blew on it before sipping.

It was good. Black. Strong.

Jane picked her coffee up and tasted it. Only a little. She was probably testing the heat. She smiled over the lip of the mug before taking more.

Gordon raised his arm, coffee in hand. “Cheers,” he said, before placing his mug down and coming over to the table. He pulled the chair out and sat opposite her. “Family?” He must have taken her aback. She seemed surprised. She immediately moved her right hand over her left as if to cover where she might have a ring on. She didn’t. Gordon had already checked.

“No.” She paused for a moment. “Well, parents, and such.” She waved a little dismissively. “But no husband … boyfriend.”

Gordon lost focus for a second and let his eyes flick down to her hands, tearing them from hers, and then returning them in an instant. It didn’t feel right. If she was without a man in her life, why did she instinctively cover her ring fingers? And she noticed him doing it, too. *Damn*.

“I divorced a while back,” she said. She seemed to relax and parted her hands, concentrating them on the mug instead.

She’s lying. Gordon smiled. *Double damn*. If only he hadn’t looked. The last thing he needed was to have to wonder what were lies, and what

was not.

"Trouble in paradise." She said it with a slight slur. As she spoke she squinted, focussing on the mug she held just away from her face. She placed it down, the colour draining from her a little.

Gordon looked at the mug. *Good*. He didn't want to have to clean up the coffee if she dropped it. He looked up to her face and she was looking at him, lips pursed.

"What have you done?" she asked. She spoke slowly. Deliberately.

Gordon shrugged. "What have I?"

She blinked once, twice, thrice. And then her eyelids dropped slowly. She tried to raise her arms, Gordon could see her thinking about flailing. Thinking about escape, but there was none of that. And then her head slumped forward.

"Jane?" he asked, eyebrow raised. He patted her on the back of the hand. Nothing Zip. She was out. Gordon stood and took her coffee to the sink, pouring the remains out. It wouldn't do to get the cups mixed up later. He was going to need some sort of refreshment when he'd finished and taking a gulp of her stone cold coffee wasn't going to make the situation better.

He set her mug down in the sink and opened the kitchen door, and then to the right and under the stairs, the door to the basement. He flipped the light on and looked down the staircase to the lower floor. Wooden stairs with smooth concrete walls went down to a screed covered floor. He checked the ceiling for spiders. He hated spiders, and they always seemed to find their way to the basement, no matter how securely locked down it was.

He returned to the kitchen and weighed up Jane. He wanted to carry her down there, but wasn't sure if she was going to prove too heavy. The last thing he had wanted to do was drop her. That could kill her there and then, and nobody wanted that. *Maybe easier to drag her*, he thought.

He got around behind her and took her weight, placing his hands under her shoulders into her armpits and pulled. The chair tumbled to the side and he dragged her through the kitchen. It was easy enough. Smooth tiled floor.

Out in the hallway it was a little harder. It was a cheap shag, but the carpet put up some resistance. He backed through the doorway onto the stairs and dragged her. It wasn't easy going down backwards while trying not to brain her, but it was better than pulling her down by her feet, her head slapping against every step. He stopped halfway to regain his breath and checked his watch. The Rohypnol would last plenty.

He got to the bottom of the steps and lowered her gently to the floor, before opening the door to her room.

Once secured in the room, Gordon dropped to the chair by the door and took a few minutes to regain his breath.

When he'd bought the house, the basement was the same size footprint as the house—give or take. It was completely open plan and left for storage. As soon as he'd seen it, when the snotty estate agent had shown him around, he knew then, it was perfect.

Shortly after moving in, he'd bought a drum kit.

Gordon didn't like the idea of wasting money, but this was a long con, and was going to be worth it. He set the thing up in the basement and banged at it for a while. Honestly, he'd thought it was going to be easy. Bang this one like this, knock that one every other time, tap his foot. But it was hard. Like incomprehensibly hard.

But all the better he supposed.

And he continued like that for a few weeks.

Every night, sometimes with a day in between, he'd go down into the basement and bang the shit out of the drums for as long as his stamina would allow.

The neighbours hated it.

The whole damned street could hear him.

Then he called in some trades and had the basement converted. He had the space split into three. At the bottom of the stairs there was a small area for storage—he had a large chest freezer there for convenience—then into a second room—for the band, with a small bathroom off of it, toilet and shower, for further convenience.

And then had the whole lot sound proofed.

Once everyone was happy, the trades finished and paid, and the neighbours convinced he'd done it so as to be a good fellow, he moved the drum kit up into the attic—vowing never to touch the Godforsaken thing again—and turned the band room into a bedroom. He changed the locks on the door to be high security with the help of some Youtube videos, and when he had the new furniture delivered for the "spare bedroom" he lugged it all downstairs and furnished the room.

One last job, and it was a tricky one, but he secured an iron clasp to the wall and concreted it in. Somewhere a chain could be attached.

He looked around the room now, all complete and even decorated in a light purple, and was happy with the renovation. His eyes dropped to Jane, lying on the bed, a large steel ring around her ankle with a chain that connected her to the wall.

The chain was long enough to allow her access to the bathroom, as well as the bed, TV, and the table and chair, but she couldn't reach the wall where he sat now, his chair, or the door.

He looked at his watch. She would still be asleep for hours and he was tired after the workout. He stretched his back and stood, going out of the door and closing it and bolting it behind him. It had a small window at head height that he could still see her from, and he'd fitted a small blind to it, so it could be drawn down and she wouldn't be able to see out.

He pulled the blind down, covering the eight inch square window, and went upstairs. He closed the door to the basement, and made a sandwich in the kitchen.

He'd barely taken a bite when he found himself starting to think about sleep more than anything else, so he went upstairs and got into bed. It was just gone eight when he closed his eyes and drifted away.

C H A P T E R 3

Gordon dreamt of something strange in the darkness. As he woke, his eyes still closed, he could see the creatures moving in the shadows. He clenched his eyes together to try and shake the strange sick feeling that came with the waves of movement still going on behind his eyelids. He opened his eyes and waited for a moment for them to focus. The light was bright, so bright. He must have left the curtains open—of course, it was still early morning when he turned in and he must have been asleep for some hours.

He blinked away the sleep.

He stared straight forward, looking out of the window of the Mondeo. He was behind the wheel, in the driver's seat, with his seat belt on. Both of his hands were on the steering wheel, locked almost in a death grip. He forced his fingers apart, and they made a suckering sound as they released the leather of the wheel.

What the fuck?

He looked out of the side window. The car was parked raggedly on the side of a narrow road, with cornfields on each side.

What the fuck? he thought, again.

He looked at his watch, noticing the red goo that was over the palms of this hands. It was sticky. It must have been what was keeping his hands on the wheel. Jesus. It was disgusting. He flicked his hands, wringing them to try and dislodge it all. Goo and bits of gross shit. *Jesus*. He looked at the time. It was four in the afternoon. Gordon went to pinch his nose and stopped himself as the goo covered hand got close. He could smell it, too.

"Bits of fucking …" He stopped himself. What had he done? He didn't remember. He was at home. He put Jane to bed and then he went to the kitchen. He was tired. Went upstairs for a nap. Then what? "… person goo." He looked back out of the windscreen … and where the fuck was he?

He opened his seatbelt and flipped it off him, leant over to the glove box and dropped it open. It has a packet of baby wipes for emergencies. *Or*

KFC, he shrugged, pulling one from the top of the pack and half wiping and half scraping at the people goo on his hands. He used a couple of wipes, getting most of it off, before tossing them to the passenger foot well, and opening the door. He got out and stood by the car for a second. There was nothing coming. Nothing had gone by him since he woke up, in fact.

He stepped out into the centre of the road and looked around. There was a large factory looking building in the distance. It could have been the one on the way out of town. No way to know from here. But if it was he hadn't gone far.

He jumped back in behind the wheel and started the engine, pulling out onto the road, and driving in the general direction of the factory.

Maybe he'd drugged himself in the kitchen, he pondered as he drove. He'd never done it before. The women never sleep walked when they were drugged. But he *was* a man. Drug-induced sleep-driving. It was possible. He looked at his hands. But drug-induced what else?

He reached a crossing soon enough and saw that it was in fact the factory from just outside town and that he was maybe thirty minutes' drive from the house.

He wondered what he was going to find when he got there.

C H A P T E R 4

Gordon drove along Rochester Road casually, but kept an eye on his surroundings. He didn't know what he'd done, and that was fine if he'd just done something to Jane. She was, after all, secured securely, and soundproofed, at home. But if he'd done something to someone else … it could mean anything. He watched for police activity. Made sure no one was following him.

He drove along the side of the supermarkets and went right at the first set of lights. Taking the back road onto the estate. It would be safer in case anyone was waiting for him. Might give him a chance. He pulled up at the next set of traffic lights and waited, drumming his fingers lightly on the wheel. He gotten back long after the schools had turned out and the traffic was light.

"Oh, shit," he said to himself. He dragged the seat belt off and reached down into the foot well, grabbing the wipes covered in bits of someone. He lowered the window, gave a quick check out of the window to make sure the pigs weren't watching him and then tossed them out into the gutter.

The lights changed and Gordon continued.

He didn't see anyone out of the ordinary between the lights and the house. He drew into the driveway and turned the engine off. Waited. He kept watch in the rear view mirror half expecting a ton of police cars to follow him, cornered, into the close.

Five minutes went by and nothing.

He slowly opened the car door and got out.

"Gordo!" The voice came from across the street. In his haste to ensure he wasn't about to snagged by the fuzz, he hadn't thought to check to make sure Nathan, from two doors down, wasn't in the garden. Nathan was a tosser.

"Shit," he muttered to himself. He looked over to Nathan, standing in his front garden. Nathan's garden was all roses. The guy was unemployed—

one of those layabouts that sponges off the state claiming for just about anything when he was just suffering from nothing more than twatitice and terminal laziness. And he spent too much of the unemployment green on fucking roses and his stupid yappy Chihuahua. In fact, if the police did come around the corner now, Gordon had mind to take Nathan out with him. “Evening,” he called back, out loud.

Nathan waved half-heartedly, and then waved the tiny shovel he was hold towards the Mondeo. “You have a leak,” he called.

Gordon walked to the back of the car and looked down. Deep red goo was coming from the back of the car and dripping onto his pristine driveway. *Fuck*. *Fuck*. *Fuck*. He glanced back to Nathan to make sure the nosey fucker wasn’t coming to *help*, before he popped the boot open.

“Shit.”

He quickly looked over to Nathan and nodded with a smile. “Tin of paint,” he called. “Lids popped off.” He shook his head feigning some sort of exasperation, and waved his hands out. “What you gonna do?” He slammed down the boot and walked calmly over to the garage, slipping his key in the lock and opening the shutter. It was tidy enough inside, and there was plenty of room to pull the car in.

He returned to the car and drove it up, into the garage. He wasn’t concerned with it dripping in the garage—there was a handy soak away in the floor, and what dripped in the garage wouldn’t come out under the shutter. We went back outside and dropped the shutter. Gordon didn’t need this. He looked at the goo on the drive. This was going to smell soon enough and draw in some flies.

He sighed.

Going around the back of the house he turned on the hose and washed down the drive as casually as he could, even giving a polite wave to Nathan, begrudgingly. The gloop ran down the drive and into the gutter probably easier than actual paint, and that was something, at least.

When he’d finished he slung the hose to the side by the fence and retreated to the front door of the house and in. *What a day*. He pinched the top of this nose and went to the kitchen. Looking at the cup on the side and

the sandwich he had started on. *Something* had drugged him. He tossed the sandwich in the bin and dropped the door of the dishwasher open. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he blurted out. It was full of clean dishes. He took a cup from the top and put it next to the kettle, poured the water from the kettle down the sink, and then refilled it. He started a sterile cup of coffee.

He then unloaded the dishwasher, and reloaded it.

This wasn’t the day he was expecting at four this morning. He should be playing with his new toy by now. He paused and thought about the car. It would be fine until tomorrow, wouldn’t it?

But it would dry up.

Maybe he had time to just stick his head in on Jane and see how she was doing?

The kettle rumbled and clicked. He poured himself a fresh coffee, putting both sugar and milk in it this time. He took a sip. He’d go down and chat with Jane for a few minutes and then go and clean up the car. Yes. That was the way forward.

It was slightly worrying that he’d completely spaced the morning. He might even have enjoyed it. He put the cup down and went downstairs.

C H A P T E R 5

Gordon raised the blind and looked through the window into Jane's room. He frowned. She was standing there in the centre of the room like a mannequin. He shook his head, hoping she wasn't some loony.

He pushed the bolt back, drew his warmest smile on his face, and unlocked the door, pulling it open.

She looked up.

"Jane." He drew his hands out warmly, but didn't approach her. He glanced quickly to her ankle where he could see she was still perfectly restrained. "How did you sleep?"

She stared at him. The look on her face was something. He'd seen worse given the situation. The last lass was a screamer. One of the reasons it didn't work out. All she'd do is moan at him. *Moan, moan, moan. Let me out. Yadda, yadda*. But she was younger, he supposed. Kids today don't know what they've got when they've got it. Jane on the other hand looked put out, but not *pissed* as such. But she didn't speak.

Gordon let his hands down to his side and dropped onto the chair by the door. The one she couldn't reach. He smiled at her. "You look smashing," he said.

"Where is my food?" she asked. She enunciated clearly, and spoke slowly, like she was talking to a child.

Gordon looked at his watch. Hm, it *was* dinnertime, he supposed, and he was a little peckish himself, what with all the sleep murder. He slapped his hands flatly on his knees and pushed himself up, before stopping himself. "Huh," he said, returning his look to her. "I think you mean, *can I please have something to eat*. You could even add *Master* on the end. If you wanted pudding, like."

"The flesh," she said. "Feed me the flesh."

"And a-what now?" Gordon raised his eyebrows and dropped back onto the chair. "I think you're getting ahead of yourself young lady." *Young*, he

thought to himself.

"You have brought me a child. Feed me the flesh."

Gordon frowned. *How could …?* "What do you know about that then?" He leaned forward in the chair.

"If you do not bring me the flesh willingly, you will do it unwillingly."

Gordon sucked in his cheeks. This was taking a turn. He scratched his face. "I can't yet. The child is in the garage and I can't get the child into the house until it is properly dark." *That's right, humour her.* That said, he could harbour the body in the storeroom freezer for a few days. Until he worked out where he'd gotten it from. He didn't know if it was a he or she. It was goo.

"Do it now," she said.

"Okay, love." Gordon stood and left the room closing the door behind him. He locked the door, bolted it, and stared at Jane as he pulled the blind down. "What on earth," he muttered to himself, returning to the ground floor and the kitchen. He pulled out a roll of bin liners from under the sink and pulled one from it. He held it out. It looked like he might be able to fit the child's corpse in there. It was pretty messed up and probably quite pliable. He reached into the cupboard and got a pair of marigolds, dragging them onto his hands like surgical gloves, releasing the elasticity with a satisfying *pluck*.

So, whatever this silly woman's game was, he would call her bluff. Dump the corpse in the middle of the room. Give her a shoulder to cry on when she realised what she had asked for, and then put the damn thing in the freezer for a couple of days. Then she could clean the floor up.

Perfect.

He took the bin liner and left through the back door, rounding the side of the house and going into the garage through the side door. As soon as he closed the door he could hear the flies. Blue bottles, their incessant low hum overtaking all other sounds in the confined room—even the sound of his own breathing.

The garage was stuffy. Uncomfortably so, with it being quite a warm day, from what he could actually remember of the day. He flipped the light on and went to rear of the car, pressing the key fob to unlock it. Took in a long, deep breath. Opened the boot.

A handful of flies took out into the room, fleeing for the sudden light, swarming around Gordon. He was already hot, sweating, all due to the lack of air in the room. And now the smell. It was a rancid, chemical-like smell. A bad butcher's shop at opening time on a hot day type smell. Been in the boot since this morning, and the flies had been picking it apart.

Gordon looked at it. It was probably the size of a black sack when it could have stood up. That would have made it, what, three foot tall? Six year old, maybe? Tee shirt on the top, by the look of it. Maybe a boy, but who could make that sort of assumption these days? Pair of shorts on the bottom. The kid was lying face down. It'd shit itself, of that there was no doubt. The tee was probably yellow. There was a small patch on the back at the base that wasn't stained a deep mahogany from all the dried blood. Shorts could have been any colour. Just mahogany now. The kid didn't have and shoes or socks on.

Maybe he'd picked it up at the beach?

He went to reach down and roll the body over when he noticed there was a knife nestled up against the wall of the boot. He took it by the handle. The blade was covered in crusted blood, the handle caked. He examined it a little closer. It was his, from the kitchen. He was certainly sloppy when he was sleep murdering. *Taking his own kitchen knife*. He shook his head and tossed it back onto the floor of the boot.

Gordon sighed and took a deep breath—him getting used to the smell and all. He grabbed the body by the shoulder and yanked it over. It was like a plaster, you see. Best to get it over with. The head was still attached, just. Which was just as well, because that sort of thing was enough to make even him a wee bit jumpy. It was a boy. *Yes,* he thought, *probably six or seven*. It looked like he'd taken the knife to the kid's throat to shut him up and hacked away a little too many times. He stuck his fingers in the gash and snorted a little laugh. The body was still warm, kept to a nice temperature

by the heat of the garage. The knife had gone deep. He was no doctor, but he could feel through to the larynx and wiggled his fingers down into the trachea. Because of the warmth, the blood was still fluid, and rigor hadn't set in yet.

Good.

He looked at the bin liner. "Damn it." It was going to be like trying to get a rose bush in there without any help. Push one bit in and another bit would flop out. Rigor might have helped, if the kid was at the right angle. *Never mind*, he thought. He dropped the bin liner over the body and took a step back. Yep, it was going to fit.

Gordon picked up the bin liner and fed it over the kid's head, sliding it under like he was putting on a duvet cover. Gordon was a *mother fucking God* at putting on duvet covers. He slid the bag down to the kids legs and lifted.

"Fuck it." The bag ripped. Gordon picked up the knife and sliced it repeatedly into the kids corpse. "Fuckitfuckitfuckit." He slammed the knife in one last time. "And *fuck you*." He left the garage slamming the door behind him and returning the kitchen, careful to leave the marigolds on the corpse. No sense in making more mess than he needed to.

He got the whole roll of bags this time. He returned to the car and dragged the body out of the boot, letting sloop onto the floor, letting out some of the stench of shit. "Fuck sake." It was starting to piss him off. This had better be worth it. *She'd* better be worth it.

He unrolled the bags but didn't tear them off, leaving them in a long sheet. He dropped them to the floor and carefully wrapped the kid in them like a rug. The oldies are always the best. Roll it in a rug.

He scooped the body up and returned to the house, kicking the door of the garage closed behind him and not stopping in the kitchen. The roll was *overly persistent* in the dripping department. He got to the bottom of the stairs and rested the gooey, dripping, wretched parcel on the top of the freezer, bits of blood coagulating almost instantly on the lid of the freezer and the smell of shit filling the small space.

"Oh, God fucking damn."

He unlocked the door and released the bolt, pulling the blind up and peering through before he opened it. There was no way in Hell that she was going to have gotten free (and if she had he was going to be having words with the hardware counter down at B & Q), but it was better to be safe than sorry.

She was still standing in the middle of the room, but now she was grinning somewhat maniacally. It caused Gordon a moment of pause. What was she up to? He opened the door and poked his head in. "Hi."

"Where is the flesh?" she asked. "I can …" She pulled a long breath in through her nose. "… smell it."

"It's just here." He looked her up and down. "You are a strange one. You sure you're ready for this?"

She nodded without word.

Gordon stuck his bottom lip out and shrugged. "Fine." He returned to the freezer and picked up the boy in his arms, cradling him like a baby. Or a ham. He walked it into the room sideways like he was carrying his bride across the threshold, unlike the way he had dragged Jane in there herself, only hours ago. "Your *flesh* smells like shit." He tried as hard as he could to keep his nose away from *the package*, but there was no hiding the ripe stench of soiled pants.

"Put it there." She pointed to the floor in front of her. She wasn't at the full length of the chain and was asking that the boy be put well within reach of her.

Gordon was well aware that she would also be able to reach him if he were to put the body down there, but he was willing to take that risk just to see how this played out. He knelt down and rested the body wrapped in plastic on the floor. "You're sure about this?" He stood, but didn't back away. "So are you going to tell me how you did it?"

Her grin faltered, but didn't drop. Her eyes never left the black plastic wrapping. "What?"

"This macabre magic trick? How did you know I'd been … sleep murdering?"

“Because I told you too.” Finally she looked up to him. “Leave us.” She pointed to the door.

Stranger and stranger. Gordon shrugged. “Your funeral.”

“Go and clean up,” she said. “I won’t be long.”

It crossed Gordons mind that maybe she was sicker in the head than he was. Sure, he’d stopped taking the medication that was supposed to help him about three years ago when he moved out of London and came down here, changing his name and everything, but that hadn’t had an effect on his behaviour. He thought. But he was fairly sure that he was different to other people. Maybe she was like him?

Maybe this *would* work out.

But he couldn’t help but feel a little uncomfortable. He backed towards the door, watching her. He couldn’t quite make her out.

Gordon bumped into the doorframe, before going out into the storeroom. He pushed the door closed and bolted it, watching through the window.

She never moved. Not an inch. She just watched him, waiting. Smiling.

Gordon pulled the blind down. He breathed, for the first time in a few minutes. That was weird. Really fucking weird.

He turned back to the bloodied freezer and started to tidy up.

C H A P T E R 6

Sometime later, as the sun had dropped from the sky and the streetlights were on, Gordon hosed down the boot of the car. The gore ran through the drainage holes—as Gordon liked to call them, they were rust holes really—and down into the garage's soak away. He was subconsciously humming a Sex Pistols and tapping his foot. The smell of death in the garage was dissipating slowly.

When satisfied, Gordon rolled the hose around his arm, wending his way from the garage to the back of the house and dumping it on the path. He went back and locked up the car, the garage, and the back door before returning to the basement to see Jane.

He stood there, wondering for a moment what to expect, before opening the blind and looking through into the room. Jane was sitting on the edge of the bed now. She was wearing the dressing gown that he had left on the back of the bathroom door, and nothing else besides. Her hair was wet.

Gordon frowned.

He looked around the floor. The body was gone, and in its place was pooling blood, and strange looking detritus. Lumps and clumps of things that weren't there before. Without looking from her, he fumbled around to unbolt the door and only looked away once he had the doorknob in his hand. He opened the door and went in, only so far as to the safety of the chair at the door. He didn't sit. Stood, he looked from her to the bloodied floor and back again. "Body in the bathroom, is it?" he asked, somewhat confused.

She was fiddling with her hair and a towel. "No." She didn't look up to him.

Gordon had had enough. He took the opportunity given by the fact that she was *busy with her hair* and stormed across the room to the bathroom. The room was wet, and clean. He stuck his head over the bath and aside from a ring of residue, there was no signs of the body … just some blood.

He turned back from the bathroom and looked at her, still prettying herself. “What is this, some kind of magic trick?” She didn’t respond. He stalked over to the bed where she was sat, crouched and flipped the sheets up to see under. Nothing. He looked at her again, and she showed no interest in him whatsoever. “Huh.” He walked over to the mess on the floor. Bending down he poked at the things awash with blood. Clothing. But not the boy’s. At least, not *just* the boy’s. It was hers too, ripped to shreds. And weirdly the bin liners where untouched. Gordon hurried back over to the door.

The safety of the door.

“What the fuck is going on? What did you do? Can you get out?”

Jane looked up to him, still patting her hair with the towel. “I was hungry. I consumed the flesh. No. But I will require more sustenance. As you did not bring me sufficient.”

Gordon shook his head. This had never happened before. Not once. Jesus fucking Christ. He grabbed a fucking looney, cannibal, nutter, and she seemed to be … enjoying herself. “I … I’m going to let you think about what you’ve done,” he said, extremely unsure of himself for the first time in forever.

He backed out of the door and slammed it, hurriedly pushing the bolt across. Then he stood there, feeling a little safer as he watched her. She finished her hair without looking up at him and returned to the bathroom where she dropped off the towel. Then she returned to the bed and sat, leaning against the headboard with her eyes shut.

Was she going to sleep now? The cheek of it.

Gordon pulled the blind down, annoyed. Hm. Well … at least he didn’t have to dispose of the body. Fucking psycho. Gordon returned to the ground floor and closed the door to the basement. He’d let her stew in her own juice for a little while. That’d teach her. He went into the living room and flopped on the sofa, pulling out his phone and opening the Just Eat app. He picked up the remote and flicked on the TV. Sitcom. He flipped to the next channel. Cookery show. Gordon only had Freeview. He thought that TV largely rotted the brain and didn’t want the extra expense of Sky just to

watch the cricket a few times a year. He looked back at the app. *Kebab?* he thought to himself. *Kebab*. He nodded.

He opened *Best Kebab and Pizza*. They had the *best*—forgive the pun—kebabs for delivery. It was still early enough for him not to get indigestion. He order the XL donor, salad, chilli sauce, and chips. That way he met the delivery price requirement. He pushed order, and the app told him it would be thirty to forty-five minutes. It would be early. Best was only just around the corner, and besides, he was a regular.

—

Gordon sat back in the sofa, letting the warm fluffiness of the cushions surround him. The kebab was good. A little sloppier than usual, but still good. It had belly-busted him, and the third can of extra strength imported lager he held had finished him off. Today was a bust for sure. Confusing, too. Still, he had Jane and that was a plus, even if she was a little strange. That said, if she proved too much, he could leave her down there for a week or two without going down. Out of sight, out of mind, so to speak. That would fix that.

But for today, he was done. He flipped the TV off. It was some American cop show CSI, forensics thing, that didn't seem to hold up, at least to here in the UK. They'd never gotten shit on him, right? These shows mush be fabricated.

He pulled and pushed himself from the sofa and stood, wapping his hand against his belly. "Bellies gonna getcha," he giggled to himself. He stopped outside the living room at the door to the basement. He had considered going down and seeing if she was okay (both literally, and figuratively) but decided against it. It was late. Tomorrow was another day.

C H A P T E R 7

Gordon struggled to open his eyes. They were gummed together, like his eyes had watered in his sleep and glued them shut. "What the …" He knew before he had opened them that he wasn't in bed again. "*Noooooooo*," he whined, long and hard. He pinched at his eyelashes and rubbed his eyes until they opened. He was sitting on the ground. It was dark. He waited until his eyes accustomed themselves to the light, realizing then, that he was in the garage.

Thank fuck for that.

But this was no joke. Why had he started sleep walking? He got to his feet and before leaving the garage, noticed that he had blood on his hands again. "Really?" Sleep murder again? He turned to the car, staring at the boot. "And what surprises are in store today?" He popped the boot open.

Empty.

Right.

He left the garage and hurried over to the house. It was daylight. He had no idea what time. He wasn't wearing his watch, and he saw that the blood was on more than just his hands. He looked to be creamed in it like a shit wedding cake. He went in through the back door. The street had been empty, so it was probably still early. The only sign of stirring was Nathan's stupid dog yapping incessantly from over his way somewhere.

He went straight to the bathroom upstairs to wash. Getting there he saw that he was caked in more blood than he had imagined. It was all up in his face. Hair. Over his clothes. He looked like a deranged Red-Shirt. He smiled to himself. It *was* a good look, but … what the fuck was happening? Gordon stripped naked and jumped in the shower, washing every inch of himself. There wasn't just blood. Whatever he'd done to whoever he must have done a solid job. There was bits of brain in his hair. Bone fragments. Some too big to go down the plug hole. Once he'd cleaned himself, he stared at the pile of clothes and human bits that wouldn't go down the hole. He'd run out of bin liners. Well, there were some in the basement. And

perhaps he should ask Jane WHAT THE FUCK WAS GOING ON for one last time.

Then there was the concern over the fact that he had killed someone, somehow, and he didn't know where the body was. *Well*, he thought to himself, *"probably" killed someone*.

Hurriedly dressing, Gordon made his way to the basement. He'd put on work jeans and a paint covered sweatshirt just in case he stumbled over a body on the way. He pulled the blind open. Jane was sitting on the bed, naked. He watched her for a moment. She hadn't noticed him, or if she had, she had made no attempt to cover her nakedness.

She had a decent body. Gordon would quite often have to force them to show him, so this was a pleasant change. He tried to judge how old she was. It was never easy to tell when someone was wearing makeup and dressed. She was maybe … thirty? A little older than his usual trophy, but still, she seemed to have plus points.

Gordon opened the door and entered, sitting straight on the chair by the door. Jane made no attempt to cover her modesty. She sat there, on the bed, facing him. "Right young lady," he said, trying his hardest to be authoritarian about things. "What, and when, did you slip me a Jimmy? There's no way this is a coincidence."

"Of course not," she said, smiling like a mother pacifying her confused child. "I have not slipped you a *Jimmy*." She said the word Jimmy like she'd never heard the term before. "But it is me that is causing you to take outings to find me flesh. I did tell you that you would feed me, one way or the other."

Gordon shuffled on his chair. "Go on," he said, unsure. She must be cray-cray, obviously, but he didn't have any answers himself.

"Have you not noticed the influence that I can have over you? That I *have* had over you since you brought me down here. You do what I want, when I tell you. You rarely even question it. And in your dreams … in your dreams you are only my puppet."

"You're fucking crazy."

"I am not." She stood. "Do you want to see?"

“See what? You’re not hiding much. Have you got something up your arse?”

Jane closed her eyes while Gordon watched. Uncertain, he didn’t want to look away. She let a small smile come from her, her mouth widening slowly. There was a crack that cut through the air. Quiet at first, then loud. It was the sort of crack that made your teeth itch. She pulled her shoulders back a little. There was the crack again. It was coming from her. It was coming from inside her. Gordon tried to back away, but his feet felt like lead. “Jane,” he said.

A line appeared on her chest, between her breasts.

Gordon could do nothing more than watch.

It grew, the length of the sternum, splitting slowly like a ripe peach, blood oozing slowly from the growing wound, at first, and then, the blood stopped. It wasn’t natural. A split like that should have caused gushing.

Gordon tried again to move. His head was starting to ache. A migraine coming from nowhere.

The wound grew slowly, widening as if a retractor was in place. Puss started to sloop from the opening, and behind it, dark space. Nothing. The flesh weeped a bloody phlegm coloured goo, as the split grew in length. Dropping down to her belly and lower to her crotch.

Gordon raised his hand, cradling his head. His nose had started to run. He dragged his eyes from her split to her face. She still had her eyes closed, and yet he could somehow still feel her watching him. “What are you?” he whimpered, no more than a whisper.

“God,” she said quietly. “I am *your* God.”

The spilt continued down, and Jane reached into the split taking each side of it, holding the flesh in her hands, and she pulled. She pulled the wound open, showing him her inside, offering him herself to read like she was showing him a book.

“Why can’t I move?” Gordon wasn’t sure if he even said the words. They may have been in his head, or maybe even she had thought them for him. He looked inside her. He looked into the abyss that shouldn’t have

been there, the abyss that couldn't have been there. Inside Jane was an infinity, she had Heaven in there, Hell, stars. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand as the blood started to dribble into his mouth. He realised he was shaking. Sickness from his stomach rising as he stared uncontrollably at her. It. At everything she was. He tried, failing, to blink. His head growing light. The vomit rose in his throat, and he tried to swallow it back, but it reached his mouth, filling it with burning. He could feel the bile on his tongue, on his teeth, he could feel the heat on skin as it burned him. He tried to spit it away, but it drooled out of his mouth like he was no more in control of himself than an infant.

"I am hungry," she said.

Gordon lost control of his bowels. He felt the shit running down his leg, and then he blacked out.

C H A P T E R 8

Gordon ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. He couldn't taste vomit, nor did he have chunks of anything in his mouth. Which, he supposed was something. His teeth felt clean, like they'd been sandblasted, and his throat was raw when he swallowed. His head didn't hurt.

He opened his eyes, half expecting to be in the car, or in the street, or halfway up a church spire, but he was in bed. His bed. Relieved, he sat and looked around. Everything looked in place. "Okay," he said to himself, swinging his feet from the bed. "What the fuck is going on?" He got up. He was naked. He never slept naked. He pulled on a pair of shorts from the chair at the end of the bed and a tee. He padded along to the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

He looked God-awful. Dark rings sat under his eyes. He was pale. There was a crust on the inside of his nose where blood had dried.

He washed. Cleaned himself. He *had* been cleaned, even if it was rudimentarily. He wondered if he'd done it himself in some drug induced state—she *must* be drugging him—or if she had done it. She must be coming and going from the room at will, somehow. Without his knowledge. And probably slipping hallucinogens into, well, everything.

Either that, or she was some cosmic entity that had the universe inside her. And weird gelatinous goo. He shuddered remembering everything until he passed out. Gordon picked up has toothbrush and shoved around in his mouth for a few minutes, thinking.

The obvious answer was to finish with her. Just go and get a hammer and smash her fucking skull in. He'd just leave her to starve, but she must have a way out. Yeah, that made sense. Fuck her up. Clean it up later. Have a day off. He deserved it, after all, the hours he'd been putting in with her. Netflix and kebab. Or a Chinese. He dropped the brush back into the sink and grinned maniacally at himself checking his teeth … ran his hand through his hair, scratching at it. He sniffed his pits. Nodded to himself and left for the garage.

Outside, he could hear that dog barking again. He looked at his wrist—that was right, no watch. He had to find that. What time was it?

What day …? He squinted at the sky. Early morning. Real fucking early. Why the Hell was Nathan's dog out at this time? He always took the yappy little shit out when he got up—like most dole scroungers—around lunchtime.

He got to the garage door and stopped, his hand resting on the handle. Dog still yapping. "Look," he said to himself, "how much weirder can this week get?" He let his handle drop and walked down to the path, looking over to Nathan's house. There were no lights on inside. He padded, still barefoot, along to the gate into Nathan's front garden. The barking was coming from around the back. He opened the gate. A little creak from the hinge. He stepped into the garden and walked carefully along the path towards the house, letting out the odd *ow*, and *ouch*, as he stood on stones. He stopped. What *was* he doing? What did he really care if Nathan had left his stupid dog out all night?

Then he heard a bark a little closer.

Damn. The fucking rat-animal had heard him come through the gate and was coming around to yap at him. Before Gordon could turn, the animal circled the corner of the building. It was one of those light grey dogs. A cross something-something. He could see instantly that it had something on its face. Curiosity got the better of him and he crouched down, allowing the thing to approach.

Blood.

Of course. Of course there was blood on the dog's snout. "For fuck's sake," he said standing. The dog trailed around at his feet snuffling for food. Gordon absently kicked at the animal, and it scurried away from him. He noted that its lead was trailing behind it. Gordon walked around the back of the house quietly, and carefully. He wanted to have nothing to do with whatever was around there—perchance Nathan had a heart attack when taking whatever-its-name-is for a walk and the little shitdog had feasted on his flesh at the first chance it got—or, or, there was nothing more than a dead bird around there and Nathan had left the thing out all night.

Don't get involved.

Immediately it looked more like the former. Nathan was lying on floor by the back door. Gordons morbid curiosity had brought him this far, but Nathan drew him a little closer. If the shitdog had done this, it'd done a particularly good job, and perhaps Gordon himself might consider feeding the fucking thing. Gordon stepped closer. He just wanted to *see*. A mental picture that he could smile about later when he'd dealt with his own problems. Maybe have a wank to it. As he got closer, he saw that whatever had done this to Nathan had done it some time ago. The blood wasn't completely dried out on the ground, but even from a short distance away, Gordon could see the glisten of the liquid, still fresh enough.

But he wasn't paying attention and he realized too late that he had gotten too close. He kicked something that rattled across the path in front of Nathan, and he lost his footing, stumbling straight into the blood. "Oh, fuck no." He tried to keep it as a whisper even after the unconscious exclamation.

Bare foot.

Gordon looked at his feet. The blood wasn't viscous enough to bubble up between his toes, but lent itself the look of macabre foot painting. "Shit." He looked at what he had kicked to start with, that caused him to sidestep.

His watch.

He stared at the watch, and then to Nathan, then to the watch again as the cogs in his head turned slowly. When the penny dropped he looked skyward. "Oh, come on." Not only had been careless enough to contaminate the crime scene he'd just stumbled upon, turns out it was his crime scene to start with. He held his head in his hands for a few moments. "Think," he whispered.

"Right." Gordon surveyed the situation. *Ignore the blood*, he thought. *Get the body out*. Get the watch. Destroy the … he looked at the blood, and the surprisingly large amount of Nathan's guts that were on the outside … forensic evidence.

It was still early. He tromped through the blood, stepping on whatever was on the path and in his way. The intestines felt chilled on his toes. He

stooped down and grabbed the watch, slapping it wetly back onto his wrist and fastening it. He scooped up the body in his arms—again, bride-like, he was getting better at the balancing act of the corpse-carry—and hurried as fast as his legs would carry him back to his own house. He was surprised at how much lighter Nathan was than he had expected, but that might have been his lack of insides. He was still heavier than the kid, though. He looked left, right, and left again as he reached Nathan's gate. There was a light on in the window at number six but no movement. Gordon picked up the pace and got the body back to his house.

He dumped it on the kitchen table.

If someone else discovers any of this before he had cleaned up, it was curtains.

He left the kitchen, back to Nathan's. Shitdog was taking a crap on the roses. Probably good for them. "Good boy?" He went around the back and started to scoop up Nathan's insides into his arms. "Damn it. Should have brought a bin liner." Did he even have any bin liners? Weren't they in the … oh, never mind. He got what he could carry. Ran back to the house.

He pulled the carrier bag of carrier bags that everyone's got from under the sink.

Back to Nathan's.

In the back yard he hurriedly pushed intestines into Tesco bags, coming across the murder weapon buried under what looked like a kidney resting by the back door. He tossed it in the bag. Back to the front.

Grab the stupid shitdog.

Back to the house.

The kitchen now looked like a demented mortuary, crossed with Battersea dogs home. He shook his head, and went out closed the back door behind him. It was getting light.

Within maybe thirty minutes neighbours would be on the street, heading out, maybe pulling bins out to the path. Was it bin day? He rounded into Nathan's back garden and dragged the hosepipe off the wheel stuck to the side of the house, turning the tap on at the same time.

But he felt he had to leave the hose on the shower setting. Too much gushing water at this time might get curtains twitching.

Patter, patter, patter.

Gordon stood there like a gardener at the Chelsea Flower Show, heaving hard, exhausted with one hand on his hip, like this was the most natural thing in the world.

The blood turned to pink, dispersing slowly. Then came the shriek.

Gulls.

"Bloody hell." Gordon looked up and one was circling, shouting war cries and rallies to its fellow gull. The noise of the water had attracted them. Gordon turned the hose off. Finally, a stroke of luck. The first one came down and consumed some of the gore far quicker than Gordon could have hoped to wash it away. *Huzzah*, he chirped internally.

He backed to the corner of the building, and they started to flock down like he'd just dumped a bag of day old fish there. He turned and fled to the house, as fast as he could.

When he opened the back door into the kitchen, shitdog was sitting in a coagulating pool of Nathan's blood that was gathering under the table. Gordon scooped the dog up. "You," he said, bringing the animal up to his face. "Are my alibi if someone asks any questions of the whereabouts of daddy. I'm looking after you, because Nathan was sick, and a family member came a took him away. Or something. We'll iron out the details later." He noticed a nametag on shitdog's collar. "Genevieve?" He looked at the dog in the eyes again. "And from this day forth, you shall be known as Shitdog. Better, right?"

The dog stuck its tongue out.

"Good enough for me." He put the dog down. "Now let's clean this place up."

He scooped up Nathan and took him down to the basement.

C H A P T E R 9

Gordon regretted asking to watch.

Jane had opened herself again, this time as Gordon sat on the chair. He had his arms on the rests and his feet planted firmly on the floor in front of him. He was transfixed, and his body felt like it was trapped there, held by some unseen force. Nature itself sitting on his face.

The mess of Nathan lay crumpled on the floor in front of the entrance to the universe as insect-like creatures crawled from the space, from nowhere, creatures never before seen by human eyes—at least, eyes that would live beyond the sight—Hell's fleas, roaches perhaps, crawling over it. They were followed by what Gordon assumed was Jane, Jane in her real form. First came eel-like tentacles, tiny, thin, and slippery. They thrashed from one side of the gap to the other, feeling for the flesh. When they found Nathan they explored the corpse.

Gordon had done a good job on Nathan from the outset, and by good by good job, he nodded to himself, there was a somewhat out of character psychotic-ness to the damage that he had dealt to Nathan with nothing more than a knife. He had carved most of his insides about with the cleaver that he had found, again from his own kitchen set, outside Nathan's back door, most of it having been done after Nathan's demise. The massive head trauma, which caused the leaked brain matter was probably an early blow.

The eels squirmed over the corpse feeling their way in and out of the wounds, snaking into a gash and out of the gape it left.

Then, satisfied that the flesh was there, or sufficient, or … Gordon didn't even know … larger tentacles came from the nowhere. Tentacles layered in rancid suckers, puckering like little baby mouths wanting to suckle on the teat. The girth of them was greater than that of Gordon's whole body, wider and more around than any living creature he'd been this close to before.

His head thumped with a burning passion, the pain behind his eyes getting bigger, pushing pressure at them, making them feel like they were

going to explode.

Relax, said the voice in his head. It came from nowhere, and yet was everywhere.

Gordon could feel his blood pumping through his veins as the tentacles wrapped around Nathan's corpse, squeezing the juice from him, absorbing it, sucking the wet flesh from the bone, and the crushing what was left, to a mush, a pulp. Jane's tentacles reached across the floor, dissatisfied with the haul, looking, perhaps longing, for new flesh to absorb. More food. More nourishment. Gordon tried to move his feet, and pull them away from the feasting creature. "Jane," he shouted, knowing that wasn't her name, not when she was in this form, like this, some expansive entity.

His God.

As if she heard, though, the tentacles withdrew, leaving the eels behind, slipping through the blood on the floor, what was left of Nathan's clothes being discarded as they sought confirmation of the end of the flesh. Then they too were pulled back into the darkness by some unseen force.

Jane pushed, fighting her body back together, the slit in her skin rejoining as the body was made whole again, the impossible universe being folded away into her.

Gordon could feel his blood close to the surface, as if he were under some tremendous g-force, his own life trying to escape from his body, but the feeling eased as the universe was sealed. He could feel the pressure lower.

And Jane spoke, "Thank you for the flesh," she said, standing outside of the pool of blood, naked and unblemished as if nothing had happened.

Gordon realized that he was still breathing. His heart rate returning to normal. He could move his hands again, letting go of the arms like that first time he awoke, letting go of the steering wheel. He stood, shaky on his feet. "What are you?"

Jane smiled and returned to the bed, pulling the chain that still secured her to the wall, behind her. Gordon watched her butt. It was a good butt, whatever it was the butt of.

She sat. “I have no name. My kind have no name. We are they who have been here since before.”

“Before what?”

Jane shook her head. “Just before.”

Gordon walked from one side of the room to the other. He made sure that he stayed out of the circle of the length of the chain so she couldn’t reach him, but he doubted that really mattered at this point. “I have no say in our relationship going forward, do I? You wear the trousers, right?”

Jane smiled. “You never had a say. Not after you brought me here. You should have let me get my business done.”

Gordon frowned, “Why were you going to an accountants, by the way?”

“They made a mistake on my year end taxes.”

Gordon shrugged. Made sense, he supposed. “So,” he sighed and returned to the seat. “How much flesh? I mean, you’re going to make me get it anyway, right? And you seem … less cautious with the whole *getting caught* thing. I mean, there’s shitting on your own doorstep, and there’s massacring the bloke next door. I would prefer not to go to jail for the rest of my life.” He smiled and looked angelic. “And I’m sure you would too.”

She half shrugged, which Gordon interpreted as either, *I couldn’t careless*, or, *no, that would be terrible*. It could have been either in all honesty.

“I require flesh daily.”

“Like, Nathan size?”

“Not like child size.”

“Well, you made me get that one, I didn’t have a say in it, but I’m going to need to take this farther afield if I’m not going to get banged up for it.”

“Then do as you will to bring me the flesh.”

Gordon nodded. “Right-o.” He got up and opened the door. “Open or closed?” he asked.

“You may close me in. I am noisy sometimes.”

Certainly when you eat. He smiled to himself. He closed the door, but didn't bother to bolt it, pulling the blind down to give her some privacy.

Halfway up the stairs to the hallway, Gordon considered how well he seemed to be taking all of this. But she did seem to have some sort of hold over him, an influence that went further than simple mind control trickery. She calmed him. Her presence made him not only understand, but accept her.

It was a strange feeling. Troubling. He knew there was a flesh eating God in the basement, and yet while there was nothing he felt he could do about it, he didn't really have a problem with it either. He … he just wanted to make her happy.

Pushing the door to the kitchen open, Shitdog came bounding up. It had been feeding on the flesh itself. Well, the blood anyway. "Whose a good …" Gordon stopped. He bent down and picked the dog up holding it over his head. "… girl?"

Yap.

Gordon put it down. He had twenty four hours to clean, and find tomorrow's … flesh.

C H A P T E R 1 0

Leaving the south coast was the only way forward. The nearest city was Ashbury, and that would have to do. It was large Cathedral city, and there would be plenty of pickings in the evening.

Gordon rumbled his fingers on the steering wheel. He was sitting at a roundabout just out of town. It was four-ish in the afternoon. It had taken him some time to clean the house up, and himself, and the basement. It was like he was *staff* all of a sudden.

Shitdog sat on the seat next to him. She wasn't strapped in, but she was behaving. Quiet, actually. He thought she might be able to assist. He had a plan for getting a hold of the flesh.

—

Gordon drove to a stop in one of the few parking spaces of the small public park that ran alongside the estuary that cut through the city. The rest of the spaces were empty.

The dark was starting to come.

And he felt … good.

The further he had gotten away from Birchingate, the better he had felt. The less … he stopped and thought about how he did feel. He felt more in control, more able to think clearly. It was as if the further he got from Jane the less of a hold she had over him. Clearly this could be a game changer. Now that he was feeling more himself, he could see that the hold she had made him feel things. Or *think* that he felt things, more accurately. She puppeteered him like a husband, and not like a slave. He *wanted* her happy. Gordon looked at Shitdog. He rubbed her head. "So we're going to do this? We'll swipe some flesh tonight, and make new plans after that." He couldn't just up and run. There would be too many complications. Mostly, someone would eventually break into the house thinking that something had happened to him, and find a naked God thing in the basement, probably very pissed off.

No, it was better that he do this the right way. Maybe brick her in and sell the house sans basement.

Either way, grab someone tonight. Get some flesh. He looked at himself in the rear view mirror. He looked rough. Like he hadn't slept for days. He was feeling so out of it as well. Like a lingering migraine was sitting in the back of his skull, and had been since this whole thing started.

He smiled at himself. *Charm,* he thought.

Gordon attached the lead to Shitdog's collar and the two of them got out of the car. The park was long and thin. At this end of it was the car park which led straight out onto the street, two minutes from the dual carriageway and freedom. At the other was the road that led straight to the city centre.

So he wanted someone from this side of the park. "Come on, girl." He gave Shitdog a little pull. "You're going to have to pretend to be Genevieve for one night. I'll get you a new tag at the weekend." He walked the dog away from the car park and onto the path in the park. A little way in he began to loiter. He wanted to look like his dog was the loiterer, not him, because he wanted to stay close to the car. This was going to take a little nuance. Style. And only a quick fucking bludgeoning.

He let Shitdog snuffle around in the grass for a while, staying to the trees, out of sight, out of mind. Nobody was going to pay attention to some likely looking geezer walking a shit dog at dusk. Once the light was gone, and there was less people, he waited. Watched.

He saw what he needed. A girl. Looked like a teenager from this distance. Skinny thing. More meat than a kid though. Gordon wondered for a moment where that first kid had come from, and then dismissed the thought, as no one had come looking for it. But it must have been local. Probably should check the local Gazette.

He bent down and let Shitdog off the lead.

The little thing scampered stupidly in a little circle and then started yapping uncontrollably. *Yap. Yap. Yap.*

"Genevieve," he called after her, half-heartedly.

The dog ran straight at the girl.

Score. Treats for you later. Gordon started a slow—almost pathetic—jog towards the girl who had stopped and was petting the dog. The old dog in the park routine. Never failed for picking up girls. Or so the Internet had told him. This was his first dog, and to be honest, it all seemed to be working out, so keeping her was looking likely. Especially if this had to go on for some months while he was selling the house.

He slowed as he approached the girl.

"Hello there, thank you." He bent in towards his knees and rested his hands down feigning tiredness. "She's a little go-er." Gordon looked at the girl for the first time, properly, this close. *Hey-ho. I bet you're a go-er too.* The girl was somewhere around eighteen. She was carrying a backpack over one shoulder—probably on the way home from uni or something. But who cared about that?

"'Sall right," she said, petting the dog as her tail went back and forth with enough gusto to take flight.

Gordon bent down and put the lead back on Shitdog. "I've been chasing her around," he said. "Thank you." He stood and looked at her for a few seconds without speaking. She turned away, embarrassed. Gordon looked around them. There was no one to be seen. Now was perfect.

He hated to do it, but needs must.

Gordon pulled the baton he had in his coat pocket and flicked his wrist extending it. She never saw it coming. He swung it with purpose. Hard. Bottom of the skull. Single blow. Never fails.

She went down like a sack of shit.

Gordon slid the baton back into itself, folding it away and slipped it back in his pocket. The pressure point at the back of the skull was always a winner—although there was a fifty-fifty chance that it might be fatal. He looked around the park again. Still no one. Thank God. He thought of Jane briefly, before crouching down and picking the girl up in his arms.

He really was getting good at this.

With Shitdog's lead wrapped around one hand, and the girl in his arms, Gordon started to hurry back to the car. He looked at her as he carried her, her face so close to his. She was beautiful. He lifted her up as he carried her, almost pulling Shitdog from the ground, getting her face closer to his. He couldn't tell if she was still breathing. He cocked his head. But did that really matter? He slid in closer still and stole a kiss. On the lips. She was still warm.

He felt a twitch in his pants.

Not now.

He got to the car. There were a few vehicles on the main road, but nothing too close. He didn't want to take a chance though. He leaned her against the car to help hold her weight and thrust his hand into his pocket, retrieving the keyfob. He unlocked the car and juggled the lead, the girl, the keys, and trying to get the boot open. Finally he got it up and dropped the girl in, slamming the lid and taking one last look around.

This was all too risky.

He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, opened the door and letting Shitdog clamber in. Then he went around to the driver's side and got in. He was free and clear … this time … but anyone could have come up on him doing this. Curtains.

He started the engine and pulled out towards the dual carriageway.

—

As soon as Gordon got passed the city limits heading towards Birchingate, he could feel her getting stronger. He could feel her want.

Desire.

C H A P T E R 1 1

Gordon stopped in the garage that he had left open when he left, getting out the car and pulling the shutter down. He popped the boot open, and there she lay, unmoved. He reached down and rested two fingers on her neck. She was alive.

He raised an eyebrow, unsure if that made his lust stronger or weaker.

He took a breath and went out the side of the garage and to the rear of the house opening all the doors, before retrieving the girl. He took her and a knife from the kitchen to the basement, with Shitdog trailing behind.

—

The girl lay motionless on the floor of the basement between Gordon and Jane. Jane smiled weakly. "You are early."

Gordon hadn't even considered that. "Shit," he said. "Sorry." He stepped forward and crouched to pick the girl up. "I'll bring her back in the morning."

"What are you going to do with the flesh?"

He looked at the girl, and smiled. "I'll think of something."

"No," Jane responded quietly.

Gordon looked at her. It's not like they *were* married, it just felt like it in his mind. "Hm?" he asked, pretending some level of confusion or sudden deafness.

"You will not pleasure yourself with the flesh."

Gordon tried not to look crestfallen, but failed. "Oh, what difference does it make to you? I *deserve* it."

"You deserve nothing." Jane turned and returned to the bed, turning and sitting to face Gordon, her feet flat on the floor. She parted her legs, resting her fingers at the base of her belly, not *quite* touching herself. "You want what you deserve?"

Gordon nodded, his cock getting hard at just the slightest hint of the offer.

She closed her legs slowly. “Then you will behave,” she said. “Take the flesh and wait until I am hungry before bringing it back.”

Gordon dragged air slowly into his lungs. *Fucking Hell*. “As you wish.” He picked the girl up and carried her out of the room, skirting by Shitdog. He carried her up the stairs to the first floor and into the back bedroom. This was all going to crap. He dropped her on the bed, looking at her with a level of wont, breathing slowly, surprised she hadn’t stirred between the car ride, the carrying, the floors, beds. Maybe she was braindead. He stroked the front of his trousers. Maybe.

Anyway.

He should gag her and restrain her. He hadn’t had to worry too much about such things since he built the basement, what with the locks and the soundproofing, but he was sure he could remember how.

He left the bedroom and returned to the basement, giving Jane a little nod as he closed the door and dropped the blind. He didn’t speak to her, he didn’t much feel like it. *Bitch*. He went upstairs and returned to the garage retrieving some rope, a couple of bungees, some Gorilla tape and some superglue. He was sure that was all he’d need. He locked up and returned to the house.

In the kitchen he took a knife, and went back to the bedroom. She was still on the bed. He placed the knife down on the side table and the *kidnap kit* at the foot of the bed and sat three quarters of the way down it, near her knees. He rested his hand on her leg, uncomfortably at first. He shouldn’t. Jane had forbidden it. But she wouldn’t know, would she? Gordon could feel the girl’s warm skin under his. It was the first time in a long time he could feel the difference between his hard calloused flesh, and another’s, soft and supple. Youthful. He let his fingers meander up her skin under the skirt she was wearing. It was easy. A loose, flowing thing when she was standing, and now nothing more than a light summer covering. Hiding her modesty. The back of his fingers brushed lightly against her panties as he got bolder. He smiled. She was a good girl. Wearing underwear. Maybe a

virgin? He withdrew his hand and bumped up the bed a little. Gordon slipped his hand under her shirt, touching her flat belly. It was rising and falling gently as she breathed, in time perfectly with her breasts. Rising and falling. He moved his hand up and felt the rib of her bra.

Gordon stood, excited. He fumbled to open his trousers, flicking the belt open and undoing the button. He dropped the fly and let them fall to the floor. He stumbled around, getting on the bed, getting over her, positioning himself to take her. So excited, as he was he didn't even remove his trousers from his ankles. It was lacking foresight, he released as his movement was restricted, but he was here now, and he wasn't going to wait any longer. Jane was never going to know. The girl would be dead soon. Pretty much a victimless crime.

Gordon held himself up on one hand next to the girls shoulder while the other ventured down to her skirt dragging it upwards and trying to pull her panties aside.

"Fucking Hell," he mumbled. This wasn't as easy as it used to be. When he was younger and this sort of thing was the normal Friday night routine he was … fitter? Maybe he should start jogging? Lifting weights? He realized how tight his briefs were, suddenly aware of how close to cumming he was.

Control yourself, man. He thought. *Dead nuns, Dead nuns, Dead nuns*. He managed to get his fingers inside her panties and pulled them to the left. Then he realized that her eyes were open.

She looked like she was about to be sick. Maybe just had been, in her mouth. She was wide-eyed, like so many of Gordon's other girlfriends had been, down in the basement. Something clicked in his mind that he hadn't gagged her, or restrained her, and this was … bad.

Then the warmth came just above his hip. Shit. He'd cum.

And then pain.

Tickling burning, turned to searing heat. Gordon tried to push himself back to kneeling, but the strength in his left arm was gone from holding himself up and he couldn't get the angle right for his right leg, like he'd just cramped. He rolled to the side, falling from the bed, clattering to the floor.

He flopped onto his back and lifted his head. The kitchen knife he'd left on the side table was sticking out of him, just above his hip bone. "Cunt."

He reached down and pulled it out, which in hindsight wasn't the smartest thing to do. Previously, the only other time he'd been stabbed was by a whore in central London, and she'd only stuck him with her Heroin needle. Again, he'd thought she was unconscious, when she wasn't, but that was another story. Blood spurted from the wound with surprising vigour. "Fucking Hell," Gordon exclaimed. He looked at the girl, who due to shock he suspected, had only just gotten to a sitting position. He slammed the knife into her side just below the ribs—which was as high as he could reach from his vantage on the floor. She screamed, but only weakly.

Gordon fumbled around getting to his knees, now easier without three inches of kitchen knife inside him, but still not easy because *his Goddamn fucking trousers were still around his ankles*. He still had a hold of the knife, and the girl had stopped screaming and was staring at him with her mouth open. A sort of, perpetual scream of silence. In fact, she looked like Munch's *The Scream*, come to life. He pulled the knife out and pushed it in again, near the same spot to the hilt, and yanked it downwards, hard. She started to gurgle, and then drew in breath, likely to scream again.

Gordon scrambled to his feet and pulled the knife from her side, trusting it like an expert swordsman directly through her throat, skewing her like a bitch kebab. Her breath in stopped—mostly because the girth of the blade was blocking her airways—but she suddenly started to flap around like a deranged fish. She was grabbing at him, wild-eyed.

She was drowning in her own blood, *and* unable to breathe in because of the knife.

Oh, Gordon thought. *A twofer. Awesome*. And she was panicking. Gordon withdrew the knife again, this time causing her to cough up the blood from her lungs, but he could fix that. He put his hand on her forehead like he was going to exorcize her, and thrust her flat on the bed, drawing the knife back and pushing it up, under the rib cage and into where he assumed a lot of inside bits were that wouldn't benefit the addition of unexpected steel.

After, sixteen thrusts—or was it seventeen?—Gordon stopped, pretty worn out. She wasn't moving voluntarily anymore. There was blood being pumped from something, but it was being pumped onto the bedsheets, not around vital things. Like the central nervous system.

And she twitched occasionally. But he thought that was involuntary.

Gordon looked at the mess. *Well, this is going to take some cleaning up*. He looked at her. Her stomach and lower chest was a concave mess of innards, but her face was still intact, and her eyes open. If he shuffled to the side, she was still staring at him. He reached down, and found himself flaccid.

"Fuck."

Then, without the adrenaline required, reality crashed down on him like a 1940's comedy piano, and the pain in Gordon's hip returned. He flopped to the floor, unable to stand under his own strength, and clutched at the wound on his torso. "Fucking-fuck-fuck." He rolled over onto his side.

There was a lot of blood, and he had no idea how much of it was his.

He dragged himself across the carpet into the hallway. Easier said than done, and a good argument for hardwood floors in the future. Slippier, see? And also en-suite bathrooms. He pulled his way to the bathroom at the end of the landing by the bannister and into the tiled room, grabbing the towel that hung over the bath. He pushed it against the wound, and looked at the trail of blood that had followed him from the bedroom. "Fuck." He kicked off his *fucking trousers*, and reached down flailing about in his own blood, pulling his mobile from his pocket. He thumbed the screen and opened the browser.

Stab wound above hip.

He opened the first page on Google, which said *Stab wounds represent 88 to 97% of colon injuries in the civilian environment*. He wanted to read on, intrigued. *Later*, he thought. He flicked down the page, *blood source identification*. Why was it talking about arses again? *Right*. If there was kidney damage there would be blood in the victims urine. If not, it wasn't life threatening. Gordon looked at all the blood. *Not life threatening*. He shook his head.

He pulled his pants down and willed himself to piss. Nothing. *Try harder. Waterfalls, waterfalls, water … sports. Damn it, concentrate.* A small amount of piss escaped his cock and looked at it. Brown-ish, no blood. It might be a bit early to tell, but clear so far. And he probably needed to drink some water.

He held the towel in place, and, realizing he wasn't going to die on his bathroom floor—body in the bedroom, God in the basement—started to laugh.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Gordon had patched himself as best he could. Gauze and some gorilla tape —luckily the tape hadn't been used for any *other* purposes. He had slapped a bit of tape over the wound first … gorilla tape holds everything together, right? … and then gauzed it and taped it on, just in case. He had showered and tidied. The mattress was a right-off, and he'd have to decide on how to get rid of that later, the sheets and his clothes had gone into the wash, and the carpet had come up surprisingly well.

And he was done, by one in the morning.

He looked at his phone and wondered about having a kebab delivered, and then thought better of it. They got fucking aggie about delivering food much past one. He slapped his belly. He wasn't that hungry anyway, and was, surprisingly tired.

His head hit the pillow and he looked at the ceiling for a while wondering if Jane was going to leave him be tonight. Hopefully he was going to wake up here, unmoved from having no night-time killing sprees. He closed his eyes, and drifted away quietly.

—

The night was full of strange dreams. At first, he dreamt that he was out have fun, killing small animals at the petting zoo, but then they changed, he was a family man … married … had children, a job and responsibilities.

He awoke in a cold sweat. "Oh, dear God, no." He swung his feet from the bed and looked at the time on his phone. Six hours sleep was plenty. He got up and stepped over the body wrapped in a tarp he found in the back of the garage, went downstairs and made coffee. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was nearly time for Jane's breakfast.

He stood, leaning against the sink and pulled his shirt up and lowered the top his briefs. The tape was still in place. He would tend to it later. Gordon swivelled his hips tenderly, and then retrieved two painkillers from

the drawer and took them with the coffee. He mustn't let on what had happened to Jane.

She'd be pissed.

C H A P T E R 1 3

Gordon went down to see Jane. *Better make sure she's ready this time*, rather that, than carry the body down and then back up. He opened the door, having not bothered to bolt it when he'd left, and walked straight into Jane's real form. She was standing on the centre of the room holding her skin open, the void inside her, the universe, almost throbbing, tentacles out, in the room. The sudden pressure in his head was immense. He dropped to his knees, clamping his hands to the sides of his head, his eyes bulging, feeling like his brain fluid was punching at the back of them.

Then he noticed Shitdog.

The helpless little thing was encircled by the eel-like tentacles, wrapped in them, as she scrabbled against the smooth floor trying to get to get away from them, her eyes looking helplessly to Gordon as it tried to reach him.

"Noooooo," he screamed into the emptiness of Jane. "*Genevieve!*"

A puckering tentacle came from the black and plucked Shitdog from amidst the eels, and with a single *yap*, she was gone. Into the ether.

As the flesh.

The tentacles withdrew from the basement and while Gordon watched paralysed in pain, Jane re-assembled herself and then stood, waiting for him.

Gordon threw up over the floor in front of him. It was lucky he didn't have that kebab last night. "Why?" he asked, raising his hand like he was posturing in some Shakespearian play. "She'd done nothing to you."

"The flesh," Jane said without moving, never breaking eye contact. "Bring me the flesh."

Gordon lowered his hand and sighed, the pain in his head subsiding enough for him to become angry. He stood. "Fine," he sulked. He had to keep himself in check. Make sure she still thought he was on side.

He went upstairs and scooped up the corpse in the tarp, before returning to the basement. "Here," he slung the girl to the floor, and the tarp opened,

spilling her out.

"What happened to the flesh?" Still, Jane didn't move.

"What?" he blurted. "What was I supposed to do, buy her dinner?"

"You did try to fuck the flesh, so would dinner have been so bad?"

Gordon swallowed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I am inside you. I know. I know *everything*."

"Well." Gordon took a short shuffle backwards, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. "I tried to be good."

"I know what you are thinking, and no, you cannot get away. I consumed the flesh of the animal because—"

"Of what I did to her, I know." He waved at the girl.

Jane twitched a small smile, and then it was gone. "No. I consumed the flesh of the animal because of the thoughts you had when you went to retrieve the flesh. Your plans to leave."

Gordon felt sick. *Shit. Think.* "I don't know what …" He let the words trail off. She had him bang to rights. Honestly, he didn't know what else to expect. "So what are you going to do because I did that?" He waved at the girl again.

Jane pushed her fingers into her chest pulling the universe open in a quick, sleek move. Gordon had no time to respond, and as *everything* became visible, her skin peeling back to reveal the blackness inside, his hands curled around his head and he screamed dropping to his knees. He was only inches from the tarp, the coagulating girl.

The eels came forth first as usual, slipping over the girls naked, split torso. They slimed around her, tenderly feeling their way across the flesh. Gordon watched. He was too close.

He could do nothing but pray that there was a God other than this.

Do you like? Jane's voice intruded his mind. He didn't want her there. He wanted to be far, far away.

Then came the tentacles, the monstrous arms of Gods, laying gently on the girl and then pulling her across the floor towards the edge of nothing.

The eels, fought forward towards Gordon. He could watch them, but he couldn't move. He could feel the pressure of the blood circulating in his body too close to the surface, and he knew that he was squeezing his own head too hard. But there was nothing he could do, frozen in the presence of his God. The eels stretched closer, feeling out for him, forging their way to the flesh.

His flesh.

He screamed an empty hollow, silent, scream.

The girl was pulled into Jane, and the tentacles curled, waiting, waiting for the eels to find the flesh. And Gordon watched.

He could hear her silent laugh, nothing more than an impulse in his head, a voice free of the confines of reality. She was in him. She *was* him.

And then suddenly the eels withdrew, the tentacles slid back into the space between the universe and Gordon, with what little conscious thought he had left, watched—the girl was gone—and Jane rebuilt her skin in front of him, locking herself back inside the cage that was *her* flesh once again.

As the pressure eased in the room, Gordon managed to pull his fingers from his temples, feeling the bruising that they had caused already starting, and he slumped to his side, falling almost foetal on the cold hard floor, breathing like he had just finished a marathon, his head pounding.

She walked over to him, naked as the day the flesh was born. He was well within the walking circle of the chain, and she still had not removed it, although he knew now that she could have done anything that she wanted.

She knelt next to him and rolled him onto his back, leaning over him like an early morning lover. "You wanted to fuck the flesh," she said. It wasn't a question, and even if it had been, Gordon was in no mind to respond. He stared past her to the ceiling. Every inch of him hurt like he'd just surfaced from the depths of the sea too fast, and he was relieved. For just those moments, looking into the eyes of the universe, the heart of his God, he thought—*knew*—he was going to die.

Jane was undoing his belt and pulling his trousers down. She released his flesh, and without thought nor wont, he couldn't even feel it, he knew he was hard. She straddled across him and fucked him.

C H A P T E R 1 4

Gordon looked in the bathroom mirror briefly, as he brushed his teeth. He didn't really care to brush anymore, but he needed some sort of pretence of normality. He looked at the bags under his eyes. He looked like he hadn't slept in a week. Maybe nearer two. He was thinner, too, that was for sure. Pale as a ghost.

He dropped the brush on the back of the sink and spat paste streaked with blood into the sink. He shrugged, not bothering to wash it away. He looked at his watch. It was nearly ten at night. The pubs would be turning out soon and he needed to find a fare. He was running out of ways to grab people off the street without getting caught. Fifteen and counting. Luckily they were all going missing, so it hadn't been until last night that the *spate of disappearances* had reached the news. It seemed the South East's boys in blue were less worried about people disappearing. No body, no foul.

That at least had bought him some time.

Returning to the ground floor of the house, he opened the door to the basement, and called out, "I'm going now. Back soon." There was no answer. There never was, but he wanted Jane to know where he was at. She might punish him if not.

He went to the garage and pulled the car out. He would go to Ashbury again. Jane was stronger now, stronger than she ever had been, and he could feel her with him like she was a passenger in the car.

Gordon listened to some light jazz on the drive. He tried to keep his mind empty. She knew what he was thinking most of the time, especially when his thoughts were strong, needy, dripping with desire. He could keep her out by not wanting the flesh. He could keep her out by not internally verbalising his thoughts. He could *feel* without her, but not think.

It made the process of getting rid of her extremely hard.

And he knew without her doing it that she could control him if she wanted to. If he were to run and she felt her grip loosening, she would just

bring him back. He pulled into the taxi rank at the top of the high street. It was eleven-thirty. He needed someone tanked. It was easiest.

There were a group of three young men were coming up the street. Gordon looked down the line of waiting cabs. There were several in front of him. Good. He didn't want *them*. He pulled out his flask and poured himself a coffee, black, no sugar. He only drank it now for the sustenance. Ever since he and Jane, well, since she'd fucked him, he'd lost all but the very edge of his taste buds. It was a shame. He had missed kebabs this last week. He waited. A young woman was coming along behind the boys. Pretty. *Pretty fuckable*. No. He shook his head and looked the other way, waiting for her to get into another cab. It was best that Gordon didn't even look.

After another few minutes, a middle-aged guy came weaving up the street toward the taxis. He was pretty weedy looking, running his fingers along the shop fronts to try and keep upright. Perfect.

Gordon watched him go to the front of the line. He counted. There were two cars in front of him. He crossed his fingers. The guy went to the first one and there was an exchange of words. Then the bloke stumbled along towards Gordon. He looked at the driver of the car in front but then continued to Gordon's Mondeo. He leaned down, pushing his weight into the open passenger side window.

"Takin' a fare?" His voice was slurred, his eyes weak. He mouth hung open making him look like he'd had a stroke.

"Jump in the back," Gordon answered.

The guy fiddled with the rear door for a few seconds before managing the handle and then pouring himself into the back seat. He slammed the door. "Those cunts said I was going to throw up," he blurted, suddenly.

"Are you?" Gordon put his arm up on the passenger seat and swivelled to look at him. He smiled at the guy. "Nah," he continued. "You'll be fine." He turned back. "Where to?"

"Addington Street, just off Westgate Towers."

The other side of the city? Perfect. He pulled out into the dual carriageway before the fare had a chance to try and pull his seatbelt on, and took the forth exit on the next roundabout. "Heavy night?" Gordon asked.

“Hm.” The guy’s head was slumped forward and was lolling from side to side.

Watching him in the mirror, Gordon tried to work out if the guy was going to pass out, puke, or both. Either way, he looked to be in just the right place for Gordon to move forward. Gordon pulled the syringe from the cubby in the door and just held it for a moment. He knew it was full, and that it would work, but just holding it made him feel better. More in control.

He pulled out of the bus lane and took a right at the next roundabout, pulling off the city wall circular and into the car park that the shoppers all used. It was empty. He pulled over, into one of the spaces, and quickly got out. He rounded the car. When he opened the door next to the guy, his eyes were open and he was frowning.

“This isn’t home,” he slurred.

Gordon leaned in close to him. “You looked like you were going to chuck.” The guy stank of shit lager.

“Hm,” he grunted, looking around, trying to get a baring.

When he was looking away from Gordon, he stuck him in the neck, pushing the plunger down hard. The guy let out a small yelp, and tried to reach up and feel where the needle was, but couldn’t seem to get his arms up that high, whether from the drug, or from the drink. He wavered back and forth for a few seconds and then slumped down across the seats.

Gordon looked at the syringe with admiration. “Good job,” he said nodding.

He straightened outside the car and looked around. The car park was deserted. He slammed the rear door and got back in the car, taking off for home. As he drove out of the city and into the quieter roads between fields, he watched the guy sleep.

His meal ticket out of there.

C H A P T E R 1 5

Returning home, Gordon dragged the guy from the back seat and lay him out on the floor of the garage. Jane didn't seem to mind if the flesh was fresh of not. He chuckled. It rhymed. And while the guy *should* sleep until morning with that much Midazolam flowing through his blood stream, it was best not to take any chances.

He put down a tarp and rolled the guy onto it. He was wearing some thirty-year-old looking biker jacket, and a pair of fucking expensive designer jeans. Mid-life crisis drinker, for sure. Trying to re-capture his youth. The wife's probably just left him for a doctor—someone more mature and reliable, perhaps—and he was out trying to find a younger model, drinking heavily as the night drew on when he realized he was about as good a catch as an old tire. He looked at the jeans and tried to weigh the guy's size up. Too small, he thought. *Right*. He crouched down and opened the front of his jacket, taking his wallet from the inside pocket.

He found some notes, good, cards, no interest there, and a driver's licence. He looked at the photo on it. Goofy motherfucker. He held the card up and looked between the guy's face and the photo. "This looks nothing like you …" he looked at the name, "… Daryl Jenkins." He tossed the cards and the wallet on the tarp next to the body. "Daryl, motherfucker," he giggled to himself. He counted the cash. Nearly three hundred quid. Not bad for three hours work.

He winked at Daryl. "So, how do you want to go?" He smiled to himself. "Quietly, I see." Gordon tapped his foot on the floor. "No such thing here, matey." He stood and looked around the garage. He wanted to inflict some … damage to the flesh.

Resentment was a strong word, yes.

And Gordon resented Jane.

The thing is, she knew it. She knew *everything*. At least she thought she did. If he turned up with pristine flesh she might suspect. She might actually *know* something was up. He walked over to his tool wall—a piece of ply he

had attached to the wall of the garage and screwed a variety of hooks and screws in, where he kept some of his most interesting tools.

He picked up the plasterboard saw—a saw that looked like a machete, except it was viciously toothed, and sharp as fuck. He carried it over to Daryl, feeling the weight of the saw. "Not bad," he said. "Not bad." He crouched and lined up where he would cut. Maybe, hack the arm off? Hack all the limbs off? He shook his head. Too, melodramatic. Not like him at all. He returned to the wall and placed the saw back. He looked at the chainsaw. *Too noisy*. But a shame. He cocked his head at the sledgehammer. "Hmmmmm …" His hum went on for some time without him moving from the spot, transfixed.

He took the end of the handle in one hand and the middle in the other, lifting it from the hooks securing it from the wall. The weight of the metal head was imposing. It was a full-size version, with a four-foot handle. He'd gone to buy a stumpy one from B and Q, but the girl that was working the aisle was hot, so he ended up buying the biggest one.

He had never to this day found a use for it.

He stood over Daryl, wishing he were conscious. Just so that he could enjoy it a little more. He lined it up, and raised it like an axe in a film. The weight was grand. He felt … *Nordic* … and bearded. The head of the hammer grazed the ceiling, putting Gordon off enough that the sledgehammer came down mightily on the concrete floor next to Daryl. The sound reverberated around the inside of the garage bouncing off all the walls, back to Gordon and then off again. It would likely have been heard for some distance in the street too.

"Fuck." Gordon let the hammer go, standing proud with its head flat on the floor. He breathed in and out slowly. *In through the nose*, he thought. He took the hammer again and lifted it, his time taking the weight on his shoulder, holding it, preparing.

He lifted it again, swinging slightly lower to miss the ceiling and brought the metal head of the hammer down straight into Daryl's face. His head split like a melon, and then popped. Or exploded. It was hard to decide which. Brain fluid slashed like cum in a whorehouse, skull flew like

boomerangs, and gloopy bits of Daryl's thinking sponge blobbed out like jelly.

And it didn't kill him, either. Well, not right away. The heart still pumped, blood chugging out of what was left of the throat-mouth bit, like someone had left the pump on at Tesco's petrol station.

It was the single funniest thing Gordon had ever seen.

He started laughing uncontrollably, leaning his weight on the hammer like a cane. He looked around the room as his laughter subsided to more of a guffaw. There was fucking blood everywhere. Including all over his jeans.

And he didn't care a bean.

He dragged the sledgehammer to the side of the room and folded the tarp over Daryl, allowing the blood to run freely into the soakaway, or not, as it pleased. He shook his head, regaining his breathe. "Sick fuck," he said quietly.

He walked calmly back to the house. It was well into the early hours now, and the lights from all of his neighbours houses and flats were off. Inside he drank a glass of water, showered, and then went to bed. He set the alarm on his phone for five-thirty. *Hardly worth it*, he thought, before what passed for sleep these days took him.

A void of nothing without rest, taunted by Jane in the shadows and she poked his psyche, resting the body, but torturing the flesh.

C H A P T E R 1 6

Gordon poked his mobile until it stopped beeping. *Stupid thing*. He got out of bed, rubbing his eyes. They were dry. His bones felt like they ached. Not his joints. *His bones*.

He had to keep his mind blank, as he had done each morning. Jane's presence was weakest after she had fed. Once she had taken the flesh and Gordon had left, he could feel a small detachment to her. It was like she was sleeping. Then, he felt that he was more able to do as he pleased, as long as he didn't focus on it too much. It was a strange sensation, going about his business trying not to pay attention to what he was doing. Each time he found himself concentrating on something too much, she got closer. It was like he was sneaking around her slumbering mind, trying not to wake her.

And he had to do it now, while she was awake.

He went down to the garage. The night had been unseasonably warm and the flies had gathered over the flesh. The smell was ripe. A mix between week old fish and shit. Gordon stepped around Daryl's brain bits, dried out on the concrete. He opened the door of the car and took out a roll of fabric, gently.

Not thinking about it.

He walked over to the flesh and knelt, tossing the covering from the body. Releasing the flies. He rolled the fabric open, revealing the seven syringes that he had created this week. Every day as she slept, he would fill one syringe with the hydrofluoric acid he had acquired from a local commercial cleaners. Just one though. Never doing too much. Never waking her. He filled the syringe and hid it away, tip toeing quietly in her mind.

And now he tip toed as he plungered the acid into the flesh.

One, two, take a break.

Three, four, do some more.

Once all seven had been injected into the flesh, he left them there on the ground. Nothing to worry about. Nothing to think about. He scooped up the flesh in his arms, a smile, as he briefly remembered carrying the flesh as a bride.

Time and again.

He'd become more than accustomed to his neighbours timetables now, as he freely carried the flesh between the garage and the house, leaving all the doors open as he went, in to the stairs to the basement and down.

The door to Jane's room was open now. There was no point in closing it. Neither of them held any secrets from the other—at least as far as she was concerned—and what little willpower he had left was hiding in the folds of his mind, plotting.

Kill the flesh. Kill *her* flesh.

It was the only answer he could see to escape this monotonous formula that could only end up with him in jail. In the beginning he had tried to explain to her that he couldn't keep bringing the flesh. It would bring others, but she hadn't listened.

And now it came to this.

He walked halfway across the room and dropped the tarp, the flesh, to the floor, and retreated a few steps. Enough that the eels could reach him if they desired, but close enough for him to watch. It was what she wanted. She derived some sort of sexual fulfilment when the eels slicked across him, and each time they fucked a little bit more of him left with her. A little more in the universe, less in his consciousness. He had to end it.

Jane stood from the bed and walked closer to the flesh. She smiled and parted her skin with her fingers and the universe revealed itself once again.

Gordon held his head. He could feel the blood coming from his ears quicker this time than last. He knew that his body couldn't keep doing this. It was breaking down from the inside.

The eels came forth.

Over the flesh.

Gordon showed no concern over the eels. Today they seemed content with the flesh. The tentacles followed the eels to the corpse, suckering against it, and pulling it towards the void. Gordon closed his eyes. He felt like he was crying, but he knew his eyes were bleeding. Each time, the pressure got worse, as if she was gaining power.

The body disappeared into the empty, and the eels retracted in with the tentacles. Jane started to pull herself back together. The pressure within Gordon started to lessen. The gash in her body started to seal from the belly up, reaching the space between her breasts when she stopped. He looked up at her.

He wondered if it was going to work.

As soon as he had thought it, he knew he shouldn't have, and she still had a hold over him. He couldn't stand. There was no getting away. He looked at her, as a single line of black liquid rolled from the top of the slit in her body and ran down towards her navel. She bled.

She didn't speak with her voice, her body, but inside his head. *What have you done?*

Gordon smiled. The question itself was enough for him to know it had done something. That it must be working.

Jane seemed to be struggling to push her skin closed, the ease of all the other times she had done it, gone. The look on her face was that of struggle. Gordon tried to stand, to get out of the basement. He needed to take this chance, whatever he could, to leave. If he could get far enough away …

The black goo ran from Jane's gash. "No." She tried to hold the skin together, but it tore, falling asunder as the acid seemed to burn it. "*You fool*," she said. The skin she was trying so hard to hold together was blackening quickly, and almost dissolving away, black goo pissing from the wound, the universe being released. The skin on Jane's face started to sink, to melt from the bones, a whole in reality appearing in its place.

Gordon realized that what was inside the skin, the real Jane was spewing out into his world, no longer confined by the body. He pushed, trying to get to his feet, but no matter what was happening with the body, her mind was strong. Angry.

Jane's skin was pulled from the skeletal form it held, releasing black, tar-like blood to the floor. It dropped Daryl's flesh, half consumed by the cosmos, leaving it to roll towards Gordon, acid still eating at the raw flesh, and parts of him sucked on like a kid's lollipop with weird gelatinous substances slicking his body.

The universe slipped out into the room, darkness absorbing light. The room being lost to the void.

Gordon screamed a silent scream as Jane fucked him. She slid in and out of him, finding ways to intrude into his flesh, her life quashing his, his consciousness sliding away from him, trapped, motionless in a floating nothing as he became part of her.

C H A P T E R 1 7

Gordon opened the boot of the car and dropped the thin body inside. It slumped, lifeless, over the other two. Somewhere in the distance, beyond the flesh, Gordon could hear screams. It was hard to hear, trapped, with no control, no more than a glimmer in the body that used to be him.

He looked down at himself. There was blood on him. He held a screwdriver—one from his garage wall—and he tossed it in the boot next to the bodies. The top one moved. Just a little. From within where ever he was, Gordon could tell the child was alive. "Hush," he said. He wasn't sure if the voice was trapped in here to, or not. He slammed the boot, went, and sat in the driver's seat.

It was hot today.

The sun shone hard in the sky, halfway across the heavens. He wiped his hand across his forehead to push off the sweat, leaving a slick of blood in its place.

He started the engine, and reversed out the parking space. It was on the seafront, next to the beach. There were people running. They were shouting. Some were coming towards the car. Gordon waved like royalty and smiled at them, before driving out along the arcades towards the town.

He drove slowly, making sure that he obeyed the street laws.

Gordon pondered. What little there was left of him was nothing more than thoughts. It was Jane that was driving. Jane that was killing. He was just along for the ride. A passenger. She was driving to the letter of the law. Like an old person. She couldn't have been more obvious if she tried.

The sound of sirens coming towards them caught Gordon. He still didn't want to go to jail, even if he wasn't in control. But maybe, just maybe, if he was taken far enough away she might lose her grip on him … but that was a hollow desire. He knew she wasn't going to let go. Ever.

The police car shot by, going towards the beach.

He drove around the churchyard, and onto the farthest end of Rochester Road, three or four miles from the estate, and waited patiently at the traffic lights.

Then he followed the line of cars away, along the road, towards Birchingate. There was an abundance of police activity, mostly going in the other direction.

He had passed by ASDA, and Tesco, and was passing Bean There when he noticed a police car following him. It was two, three, cars back. Probably returning to the station, but Gordon watched. He turned right onto the estate. His body was paying no mind to it. His mind raced as the squad car followed suit, turning onto the estate. "Jane, Jane." He had no idea if she could hear him, or if she even tried to. "The police, Jane. They're following us. You need to drive faster. Get away."

The car took another right into the close, drove quietly, peacefully, along to the house, and up onto the driveway.

Gordon saw the lone police car pull across the end of the road, blocking the exit.

"*Jane!*"

He turned the engine off and got out of the car. Several of his neighbours were there, watching him, watching the police car, confused. Gordon was bloody. They wouldn't be confused for long.

Gordon opened the boot of the car and scooped the first of the bodies up. Like a bride. The child was heavy, and blood pumped with some vigour from the screwdriver wounds. He probably wasn't dead still. *Yet*. He was heavier than he ought to be. Jane had made him take three children this time. Three, she thought, would be enough to sate her.

He turned and looked at the people in his street, standing, mouths-a-gape, watching him unload the bloody child like it was his shopping from Tesco. He waved a greeting, smiling, and turned, taking the flesh to the house.

Jane was all the house now.

Soon, Jane would be all.

The End

C U L T

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

The building rose ominously over the fields, as the car turned from the last roundabout to the edge of the estate. From a distance, the building looked like any other shitty council tower block. It had been newly clad in what was currently considered trendy—beige tiles—but Sam knew that six months ago, when her father and she had first come to see it, it was a stock grey. Battleship, or something.

That was just after they had thrown her out of Briars Medical School. Just the thought of it made the scars on her arms tingle. She put her hand on the sleeve of her lower arm and caressed it.

But now, months on, she sat in the backseat of her parents estate car, Stone Sour pumping in her buds, and her father, Roger, and mother, Lilian, in the front. Shit piled around her like she was in storage. She pulled the wire that fed the music to her ears and both of the buds popped out, falling away. "Done it up," she said, to no one in particular.

"Looks nice," Lilian replied, watching out of the front. Sam could tell she was dubious, but she'd never seen it before.

"Newly cladded," Roger chipped in.

"Hopefully not with the same shit that lot in London had." There had been a tragic fire at a similar tower block in London a few years back and the cladding had not met fire safety standards. People had died. Lots of them.

"Language," Roger said, glancing at her in the rear view mirror.

"Bullshit," she muttered, quietly enough that neither of them heard.

They turned left, away from the opposing Tesco and into the car park of the tower block. They pulled to a stop in an empty space and just sat there. Sam was waiting for her father to give some sort of instruction as to what he expected of her, like he usually did. "Leave the stuff in the car," he said. *There it was*. "Let's go up and make a cup of tea."

Sam shrugged, and pushed the door of the car open. It stuck sometimes, but not this time, and she almost fell out onto the concrete. "Fuck's sake," she muttered, clambering straight. Her mother and father were getting out,

and Sam stepped away from the car, looking first up the building. There must have been near to thirty floors. Just looking up at it made her head spin, the onset of some weird vertigo even though she hadn't left the ground. Then she dropped her eyes down to ground level and scanned the base of the mammoth building. There was some parking around the base of it—where they were—and an entrance to an underground car park over to the side that was blocked off, and looked like it had been for years. Cars were parked across the shutters as if they weren't there. Apart from that, it was a standard, shitty, council tower block from the eighties, sold off to any slumlord that wanted it, and rented out to the poor.

Being on the coast of the England, rather than in the city, didn't make it any grander. It's not like you could smell the seaside from here. There weren't even gulls. It was a good couple of miles to the beach.

Sam circled a little, looking the building up and down before she stopped, as she saw three people over to the far side of the building. They looked young. Well, younger than her anyway, sixteen, maybe seventeen. They all had bikes they looked too big for, and were certainly too old for.

Roger stepped to her side. "Going to be friends of yours?" he asked.

Sam snorted. "I don't think so. They're just kids."

He looked at her quickly. "They don't look any younger than you."

Sam shook her head, and stepped back to the car, reaching in and retrieving her ipod and backpack, slinging it over her shoulder and pocketing the device. "Doubt," she said. That was the end of the conversation. She had spoken.

Her mother had walked away from the car clutching her handbag to her chest like she was going to be robbed. Sam knew that looking like that, she *was* likely to be robbed. She strode over to her, and pointed up at the building. "Look at it. What do you think?"

"Very nice." Lilian spoke quietly, perpetually afraid of change as always. She didn't want to be here—fuck it, none of them wanted that—but Sam and her dad at least managed to hide those thoughts and feelings. Bury them deep in the back of their minds.

"Come on." Sam sounded chipper. "Dad, you have the keys?"

He nodded, fumbling about and locking the car door.

Sam took her mum's arm and walked with her like a date. She carefully eyed the three boys who still stood, watching them. They watched as they went across the car park, and didn't move until they had gone into the building.

The flat was on the eighteenth floor, number one-eight-eight. The lift smelt of piss, but at least was working. It was a start. And the flat had been cleaned, if only rudimentarily. It was probably a nice flat when some architect had put pen to paper, but now it was tired. Dirty in places. And to coin the term, *unfinished*. Paper hung from the odd tear on the wall. The carpet was bare in places. Paint, chipped.

The front door was a cheap, thin wood. Unlike the oak door of the house they had moved out of, it looked like if you kicked it enough times in a pair of D.M.'s, you'd put your foot through it. And it was unpainted. Bare, dark brown wood. MDF, maybe. It led into a small hallway that ended with the living room. This flat, and likely most of the others was a corner flat, and so windows were at least aplenty. Off the hall was a door to Sam's bedroom, one to her parents, the kitchen, bathroom, and the living room at the end. When Sam and her dad came down to look at the place, three weeks ago, it was still furnished from the previous tenant who had skipped out on the tenancy, apparently. It looked more spacious currently, but they had brought a fuck ton of stuff down from the house.

Sam went over to her bedroom door and pushed it open. "Shit," she huffed. "Dad."

Roger went over and poked his nose in the door. The bed from the previous tenant was still there.

At least the rest of the room was empty.

"I'll call the agent," he said, retreating back to Lillian, and putting his arm around her.

Sam watched. He looked like he was consoling her. Perhaps he was. She went into the room and went over to the bed. She dropped to her knees and pulled the sheet up. Nothing underneath it. But up this close, there was a smell. Rancid. She got up and examined blanket discarded over the top of it. Taking a deep breath in, she pulled the blanket hard like a magician trying not to disturb any plates and glasses on a table.

The blanket came away with a flourish.

The mattress was stained black and the stench of shit burst free into the room.

“Holy fuck,” she exclaimed.

Then, a movement within the black. A wiry ball of dark brown fur hidden in the glance that Sam had of the dried faeces burst out running. She screamed. She was not afraid of rats, nor was she particularly delicate, but it surprised her. The thin rodent leapt, lemming-like, from the mattress to the floor and bolted towards her.

Sam still had the blanket in her hand and she tossed it to the floor, covering the thing. It left a bump there, scurrying blinded in circles.

Her father appeared next to her. “What is it?”

Sam pointed at the blanket on the floor. And then her finger raised to the bed.

“That smell,” he said.

“Fucking shit,” she responded.

This time he didn’t correct her language. At nineteen, she didn’t want him to at the best of times, but she didn’t expect that would change anytime in the next decade, at least. But this was an exceptional circumstance.

The blanket moved again.

It was Roger’s turn to cry out in surprise this time. He stamped on the movement before Sam could stop him. There was a small crunch, and the movement stopped. “What was that?” he asked with a deliberate tick in his voice.

“Rat,” she said, simply.

“Shit,” he said, rather out of character.

The next ten minutes was spent moving the blanket with rat’s corpse, the shit-laden mattress, and the bed frame for good measure, out into the corridor outside the flat. It wasn’t ideal, it was hard to get by, and almost blocked the flat opposite’s front door.

“No.” Roger was on his cell to the letting agent. “You need to arrange it now.” He curled his body around to face the wall and lowered his voice, maybe hoping that Sam and Lilian wouldn’t hear. “*It smells of shit, and we*

put it in the corridor," he whispered. "Uh-huh. Yes. Well—Right." He ended the call, staring at his phone.

"Well?" Sam asked. She looked at Lilian, who had been watching her father the whole time, as she turned to the window overlooking the estate, staring out silently.

"He said that we should bring it back in if we know what's good for us, and he'll arrange someone to pick it up on Monday."

"Fuck that," Sam replied. Her father's eyes flicked from his phone to Sam and back down again without word. He may not have agreed with the language, but apparently he did, the sentiment.

"Quite."

The room soaked in silence for a few minutes, with no one speaking, and little movement. Finally, Lilian broke the quiet. "They're here," she said.

Sam's eyes widened and looked around the empty room. "But we haven't even got a TV." Roger laughed.

"The movers," Lilian continued. "They're here." She pointed out of the window, with no acknowledgement of Sam whatsoever.

C H A P T E R 2

The movers loaded the bedframe into the lift as Sam watched. It was an antique bed that they said they could get up to the flat as long as it was both dismantled before they picked it up, and it fitted in the lift. They weren't going to carry it up eighteen flights of stairs.

She saw their point.

Standing in the lobby of Lanner Court, Sam was of different minds. The last piece of her bed went into the lift and the youngest of the movers made a gesture asking her if she wanted to get in and go up. She shook her head. He pushed the button and the door closed. She looked at the grime on the walls. Years of mistreatment, and zero effort in cleansing. She loved her bed, but it just didn't fit here. She looked at the mat by the entrance. It was sticky. She sighed and went out the front. The removal lorry was parked across six spaces, and they'd left one bloke sitting with his legs out the back, guarding the rest of their belongings. *Probably wise*, she thought. She glanced in the back of the lorry as she wandered by, nodding to the older man in there. To be honest if the three lads that had been there when they arrived had wanted to take something out the back, this guy wasn't going to be able to stop them.

She wandered towards the road. She could already see the supermarket on the other side of the street from the edge of the car park. Convenient, yes, but somewhat common, she thought. Coming from Camden, she was used to a residential street being a residential street. Not a busy main road, come shopping centre. At most she would have expected a church.

"Oi."

She was drawn from her thoughts by a voice. She turned, having wandered almost to the main road. Behind her were three lads with push bikes, probably the same three from earlier. She hadn't paid enough attention to what they looked like to be sure. "Yes?" she said, suddenly aware that she was a fair distance from the lorry, and the only source of a saviour from these … she looked them up and down … *boys*.

"Moving in?" The lad in the middle spoke. He had a cigarette in fingers, but it wasn't lit, he was twiddling it. His head was shaven, and his

nose too big. He had piercing in his eyebrow.

"Wouldn't you like to know." Sam crossed her arms across her chest. She suddenly felt very naked out here on her own.

He nodded, looking her up and down. "You put the shitty furniture out on eighteen," he said. It wasn't a question. "I assume, that you will be takin' it back in when you've loaded your stuff into the flat." Again, not a question.

"You assume wrongly," she said. *Too brave*, she thought. *You should've just said he'd have to speak with Dad.*

"My ma lives in the flat opposite, and she can't get out properly."

"You live in the flat opposite?" She had meant that to be her inside voice, regretting saying it immediately.

He stepped from the bike and left it drop to the ground. "Look." He took a step towards her. "I never said I lived there. I said my ma. You gonna move that fucking shit stained crap, or not?"

Sam took half a step back. "I … I don't know." She felt like her personal space had been violated.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a blade, flicking his wrist. It was open. She couldn't take her eyes from it, stepping back once again. The blade was clean, the daylight glinted off it. He waved it upwards, drawing Sam to look at him. She obliged.

"Talk to me, cunt." He smiled and pushed his elbow into the lad on the bike next to him. He had a hoodie up, and Sam could barely see his face. "Gonna move it?"

Sam nodded. "Yes." She tried to see by him to the lorry. She could see the legs of the mover that was waiting there, but not enough of him to be able to try and get his attention. She returned her look to the boy. He smiled in a way that was neither warm, nor reassuring. Then he folded the knife away and took a step back.

For the first time Sam paid attention to the rest of him. He was wearing track suit trousers that didn't fit right. A jacket—no, a hoodie with the hood hanging down his back—and a tee underneath it. Torn. He pushed the cigarette into his mouth, but still made no attempt at lighting it. He picked up his bike. "As soon as you've finished moving shit in." He turned away

and kicked himself into motion on the bike. Sam looked quickly to the other two. The one he'd elbowed was younger, maybe. The other had a baseball hat on. He looked about the same age. They all looked a little younger than Sam. But they were as big, tall, and the one in the baseball hat was stockier. The other two turned circles on the bike and rode away, following the first.

"Fucking shit," Sam muttered under her breath. She waited for them to pass the lorry and get a way by the tower block, before she started to follow. When she got up level with the removal lorry, the mover nodded at her, making some sort of jovial acknowledgement. He'd seen nothing, but Sam just shook her head and continued back to the building. She went in and started up the stairs.

C H A P T E R 3

There was shouting coming from down the corridor. Sam stood in the doorway of the stairwell. She'd taken her time coming up *eighteen fucking flights* of stairs, but it had allowed her to have a toke on the joint she had in her back pocket. She had wondered if she was going to find a new dealer coming down here. She didn't smoke much, but she preferred to score her own rather than bumming it off anyone, and she wasn't going to know anyone, anyway.

However, if the graffiti on the walls of the stairwell were correct, she could get the number of at least two dealers from there, and also *Fat Peter* who liked to *Gape Arseholes*. Also, she could probably ask that nice lad with the bike and knife. He probably knew someone.

"Fuck off."

The voice brought her back to the here and now. It was one of the movers. She looked around the corner. Two big guys were up in the face of one of the movers, and there was broken glass on the floor. Sam could see her dad standing in the doorway of the flat blocking movement either in or out. He had his phone in his hand, nervous. *Oh great,* she thought, *he's going to call the police on our new neighbours*. That stupid dickwad from downstairs may have been pushing his luck but she wasn't going to get shanked over a fucking mattress. Not today, and not tomorrow. She'd just move the fucking thing regardless of what her dad had to say, throw it out the window if necessary, and maybe ingratiate herself with the locals. It was clear even now that it was one of *those* estates, and she'd rather not spend the next six months looking over her shoulder.

Six months.

That was how long they had taken a tenancy for, and how long her father had promised it would take for him to get back on his feet.

Fuck it. She left the corner and started towards the argument in the corridor. The two men that were facing down the mover were older than she was. Twenties, maybe. At least they weren't boys. It appeared the argument was about something that had been knocked from the movers hands by one of the other men. Now they seemed to be threatening to push the movers

face into the shit strained mattress. Sam stopped in the centre of the corridor and waited. There was no way around them to the front door, and she wasn't about to interrupt.

The shorter of the two men took a step back, weighing up the mover. "I will erase you from the memories of your cunt children," he said.

Interesting insult, Sam thought. The mover didn't speak. He was glued to the spot, looking like he was going to shit at any moment.

"Huh," the shorter guy said, and pushed the mover's shoulder.

The mover went against type, and didn't move.

"Huh," he said, again, but before the shove landed this time, two more movers came by her father, and filled the corridor. *The heavy lifters*.

The heavy lifters seemed to diffuse the situation quickly. The shorter guy and his friend immediately backed off.

"Problem?" asked the bigger lifter of the two. He had a deep voice, far deeper than it should have been for a ginger. Size of a brick shithouse, though. He looked at the mover they threatened. "Bruv?"

That seemed to end it right there. The two guys—presumably from the block—backed further away, crushing the broken glass under foot. "Yeah," the shorter one said, as they turned to pass Sam, heading towards the lift and stairwell. He looked her down quickly. "Nice tits," he said.

Sam raised an eyebrow. *They are, yes, but you'll never know.*

They stomped off, rounding the corner, and were gone. There was patting of shoulders and a little consolation play amid the movers, but with the situation over, everyone moved on.

Except Sam.

She watched her father return into the flat, to her mother, to move furniture about, and she watched the movers go down the corridor to return with their last loads of belongings.

Within an hour they were done, and the family were finally in.

Sam looked at the shit stained mattress still leaning against the corridor outside the door. She pulled her marigolds on and dragged the thing into the flat.

“What on earth …?” Roger stood in the doorway of the living room, hunched over the sofa he was dragging from one side of the room to the other.

“They said that there would be trouble if we didn’t keep it in here until it was picked up.”

He stood, arching his back and pushing his hand into his spine. “You can’t let people push you around, love,” he said. “That’s not our problem.”

She pulled it across the corridor and into her bedroom door. “No, it’s not our problem. It’s mine.”

C H A P T E R 4

With the windows wide open the stench of shit subsided into a foul odour, and then to a mild inconvenience quite quickly. Despite her father's objection that the mattress should, under no circumstance, be kept in her bedroom, that was where it was going to be kept. The blanket plus squish rat had gone down the rubbish shoot. She had dismantled the bedframe and stood it up against the wall in front of some vent that fed out into the wall. Creepy looking thing. Probably some nineteen sixties attempt at air-con.

Sam sat on her bed, staring out of the window to the sun setting over Tesco. Even here, in this shit stained, arse-gaping, joyless tenement, the sunset was still pretty. She pulled a tee over her head, one that didn't even come close to matching the shorts she was wearing. But who cared? She was in for the night.

Sam's feeling of serenity was broken by a scream. It wasn't loud, but they were on the eighteenth, and it was coming from out the window. She hurried over and looked out, down the sheer drop to the car park. There was no one down there but the height made her dizzy, the view flexing in her head. It made her want to puke.

"*Please, no!*"

It was coming from above. Sam twisted around and two storey's up and a couple of windows over, a torso was half hanging out, headfirst. Arms dangling.

"Fucking hell," Sam said. She pulled herself clear of the window and ran across the room out in the hallway of the flat.

"Dinner's nearly ready," her mum said as Sam bolted towards the front door.

"I won't be long." Sam slammed the front door behind her and ran for the stairs. No time to wait for the lift. She already found that it could take five minutes or more to reach you. She hit the stairwell, and went up.

Two floors.

She burst out from the stairs and into the corridor. There was another scream. Why was no one else coming to help? She heard voices coming

from an open door along the corridor and she went for it.

"Where is Noah?" the voice asked. Sam recognised it as the voice of the shorter of the two from the corridor earlier.

"I don't fucking know, Leo. Fucking pull me in."

Sam got to the door and looked in. It was a different layout to hers, the front door of the flat was in the middle of the living room. Leo, and the other guy from earlier were standing by the window, hanging on to a pair of legs. "Fucking hell," she blurted.

Leo turned, saw her and smiled. "Oi, oi, Jez. Looksy here. It's Nice Tits." Jez turned to look, the two of them holding firmly on to squirming legs. They turned back to face each other, and gave some sort of nod of agreement, and then hoisted the man from the window.

His scream died almost instantly as he dropped away, plummeting the twenty floors.

Sam went cold.

"Get her," said Leo.

Sam turned and ran toward the stairs. They were big lads, probably slow. At least, that *might* be the thing that saved her. She shouldered through the door and started upwards. There was no sense in pulling her mum and dad into this, and going down the stairs would surely do that. She wanted to lead them away, and find a way down after she had gotten a distance from them. She had the whole building to try.

She was on the next floor before they followed through the door. She heard muffled instructions, and she carried on, hearing them follow. They were slow on the stairs. She carried on a few more flights, and then out into a corridor. Floor 24, the sign said.

Panicked, she didn't know what to do. Bang on doors? Scream rape? Run? Hide? It nagged at the back of her mind that no one else had come to help the bloke in the window. She turned down the corridor and ran, hard. There was a door at the other end. A fire escape. Alarmed. Sure to be. That didn't sound too bad. Alarms going off? People thinking the building was on fire? Maybe, just maybe, leaving their fucking homes.

Her feet pounded on the floor and as she got within reaching distance of the door, she saw the chain wrapped around it. She crashed, full speed into

it and screamed, "*You lousy mother fucker*."

And the door to her left opened. Flat 247.

An elderly woman pushed her face out into the hallway. A sweet looking octogenarian. "Problem?" she asked.

Sam sucked air in, giving a quick look back the way she had come. "Do you mind?" she asked, almost pushing the woman aside.

"Not at all," she replied, moving out the way.

Sam went into her flat, and across the living room. The flat smelt of old people. She walked straight to the window and pushed her face against the glass. She couldn't see the base of the building, not even close, and she banged the palm of her hand on the window out of desperation. "No," she muttered.

"What's the problem, dear?" The old woman had followed her to the window and looked out, trying to see what Sam was looking for.

"They dropped someone out the window."

The woman looked at her. "Oh, I doubt that. Probably a prank. Cuppa tea?"

Sam stared out to the dusky sky and nodded. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was all a fucking joke. She turned back as the woman shuffled across the room and out into a pokey hall off the living room. She went and sat on the sofa and held her head in her hands, listening as the old woman rattled cups and saucers, a teapot.

She also kept one ear on the front door. Almost waiting for Leo and Jez to open it and walk in.

The old woman returned without the front door being opened. She placed a tray on the poof at the end of the sofa with two cups of pissy looking tea, and a saucer covered in bourbons, on it.

She passed one of the cups to Sam and rested the saucer on the arm of the sofa, before retiring to the armchair across from Sam. "So you're the new family, just moved in?" she asked.

Sam stiffened.

Seeing her reaction the old woman smiled. "No need to worry about me, my dear. Word gets around is all. I'm Jenny, but most people around here call me Nanny." Again the warm smile.

Sam sipped her tea. It tasted pissy too. “Nice to meet you, Nanny. I’m Sam. So have you lived here long?”

Nanny bobbed her head and Sam didn’t know if it was a voluntary reaction or not. “Oh, yes. One of the first, me.”

Sam nodded. She wasn’t overly comfortable with the situation, but better this than the alternative. “We’re down from London,” she continued. It was warm in here. Too fucking warm. *Old person warm*.

“I know, my dear. You and your la-di-da furniture, and your fancy ornaments. Fucking wankers.”

Sam looked at her. “What?”

“London bankers, was it? Your dad, I mean. What does he do?”

Sam blinked a couple of times. It was getting hotter. “Do you mind if I get some air?” She motioned to the window.

“I think you should stay right there.” Nanny stood and shuffled over to Sam, taking the cup from her hand. “Don’t you fucking dare stain my sofa.”

Sam was tired. Hot. Her stomach bubbled like she was going to throw up. Or shit. Both. She watched Nanny walk around the sofa and go towards the front door. “What have you done?” The last word barely came out. She slumped back, still able to make out Nanny at the door. She opened it. Leo was on the other side. They exchanged words, but it was getting harder for Sam to hear.

Everything was going dark.

C H A P T E R 5

Sam's head hurt. She struggled to open her eyes. They hurt. The actual balls of her eyes stung as she tried to open them. Even as she blinked it away and fought for her eyes to adjust to the light. It was dark, and one eye was adjusting quicker than the other, disorienting her further. She wanted to wipe her face with her hand, but she couldn't. Sickness rose and fell in her.

What was going on?

She squinted. She couldn't see anything. There was something over her face. What the fuck? She tried to move again. Something held her hands. Ropes, something. She was tied down, onto something hard, and flat. She couldn't move her feet either. "What the fuck?" She spoke the words this time, but they came out wrong, broken. She could feel something in her mouth with her tongue. Something smooth *in* her mouth, stopping her from speaking.

She panicked and fought against the binds, shaking her head from side to side to try and dislodge whatever covered her. Nothing seemed to do any good. She was still tied tight, her face covered, her mouth gagged.

And then a man's voice from next to her head quietly said, "Now, now, little girl. Calm your furs."

Sam tried to scream, but for all the energy she spent, all she achieved was making her throat sore. Then she felt skin on her leg, just above the knee. She wailed again, inside the gag, and tried to flinch away, squirming to move. Trapped.

He laughed.

Sam felt movement. She was being wheeled on something. A bang, and a lurch. She was wheeled *into* something. And then she felt it. She was being pushed through a door like she was on a gurney in the hospital. Her stomach turned with fear. She could hear people laughing. There was cheering, and it was getting louder. She fought against the binds, kicking out her legs and arms. She could feel them digging into her, cutting against her skin. She could feel the warmth of blood as it let lightly from her wrists.

And the crowd became so loud it was deafening.

“What have we here then?”

“Fresh fucking meat.”

Sam could only hear some of the jibes against her over the crowd, most of whom didn’t seem to be aiming much at her, directly. She felt like she was being wheeled into the back of an event, a fucking wrestling match, or something. Something wet hit her legs, something *splashed* on her. She tried to cry out, she tried to call out for her father, but no words passed the gag.

The gurney banged as it rode over something. Clunking like a car on speedbumps. The voices echoed around the space, bouncing back and forth from the walls. She could barely make out anything that was being said, called, shouted.

Then the room started to fall to a hush. Close to her, at first. They stopped, and then those near them stopped, and finally the room was all but silent.

Sam could hear the sound of her own breathing. She could hear someone crying, but it sounded so far away, and she could hear struggling. Struggling that sounded no different to her own. Then the gurney stopped and the room fell silent, besides the weeping of a woman.

C H A P T E R 6

"Good evening."

The thick burlap that was hooded over Sam's face was roughly pulled from it. She was blinded by the sudden intrusion of light and quickly tried to blink it away. She was facing a hard grey concrete ceiling. Her senses suddenly flooded over her when her sight returned. She was cold. Cool air ran over her. She knew she wasn't, but she felt naked. She could smell sweat. Grease. Dirt. She lifted her head. She was still wearing the clothes she had on before, thank fuck. Tee and shorts.

She looked around for the first time.

There were men standing, watching her.

She couldn't see how many to count. But they stood over her, threatening. The looks on their faces suggested that the sight of a nineteen-year-old girl tied to a gurney was neither a shock, nor unwanted. She made the mistake of looking into the eyes of one of them. She'd seen the look before. When she was in school, fifteen years old, one of the sub-teachers had looked at her like that. He'd spent the day too close to her, brushing against her. He was a dirty fucking pervert, stopped only by the system. She'd known then that if he had his way, he would have fucked her. And this guy was the same.

Difference was, this time she was tied to a fucking gurney and surrounded by fucking psychos. No system in place. Nothing to protect her.

As sudden as it came, the fight in Sam subsided. She was overtaken by a horrid, vile, fear. So strong, it almost blinded her.

"Let her through," the voice came again. It was a woman. Sam knew the voice.

The gurney started moving again. Rumbling her forward. For every inch she moved through the crowd, she tensed harder. It made her sore on the hard gurney.

She looked back to the ceiling, stealing her eyes from seeing into anyone else's. Shit electric lights hung from chains on the ceiling. She saw words painted on the concrete as they passed stanchions. The words were

yellow, but faded. *Exit*. As she cleared the edge of the crowd, she saw the woman stood atop a small constructed stage.

Nanny.

She sucked in a sharp breath and braved looking around again. There was Nanny and there was someone else on the stage, tied maybe, but onto a contraption, not a gurney like she was. Also with the head covered. Sam looked into the crowd. They looked … wanton. Evil. But most frighteningly, they looked at her with desire. Men, she noticed. They were all men. Her head flicked from side to side as she tried to see a way out, she pulled at the binds. She thrashed her head trying to loosen the gag. There was a sea of them. Maybe thirty? More?

Fuck.

Then there was a clunk as something vibrated through the gurney, and Sam was raised from horizontal to vertical. She slipped a few inches as weigh shifted and her binds held her in place.

The crowd let out a roar as she was brought to a standing position. She watched them leering at her body, craving her. Then Nanny called for quiet. The room hushed, the echo's stopped. Still, there was a quiet weeping.

Nanny stepped with quiet calm to the edge of the stage. "Welcome, my daughter." She smiled.

Sam tried to respond. To tell her to go fuck herself, but the gag stopped the words, letting out only muffled grunts.

"I'll make her grunt," came a voice from the crowd. There was a low ripple of laughter, and someone even clapped.

Nanny waved her hands in a downward, hushing motion. "Calm down, boys," she said. "You'll get your turn."

Sam wanted to vomit.

"Welcome." She looked at Sam. "Welcome to the Court of Lanner."

The crowd cheered. It was like their sports team had just won at sports. *Fucking cunts*. Sam wildly looked around.

"I suppose I should do some sort of induction before we begin," Nanny said. Another short ripple of applause. "The Lanners are responsible for the cleansing of the bloodline, and you, my dear, are now one of us." She gestured towards Sam. "You can be as happy as you like in your new

position." She stopped for a second, before delivering the punchline. "Or positions." They all laughed. "But regardless, you will be required to produce girl babies. We have not been lucky in the last two generations. Siblings don't make great babies."

"But we like trying." The same voice from the crowd. A longer, lower, laugh, and the slapping sound of some high fives.

"Quite," said Nanny. "Get me Neil."

There was some pushing and shoving in the crowd as they acted with some strange level of boisterousness. It was all playful, like this didn't mean … anything. Then, ejected from the crowd came *Neil*. It was the boy with the bike that Sam had a run in with this morning. *Shit*.

He looked at her wearing a shit-eating grin, fist-pumping, and bumping, and generally bro-ing down like he was about to make a pass at some chick in a pub. Bravado. They were cheering him on, making him feel like he was the man. *A* man.

"Come on, young man," Nanny said, waving him towards the stage. There was that word again. *Man*.

It made Sam feel sick. This boy wasn't a fucking real man. She pulled her wrists hard. She could see blood weeping from the cuts that were being made by the cable-ties. She wasn't getting out by pulling. She looked down to her feet. Same. Wrapped around her ankles, and smattered in blood.

Neil climbed up onto the stage. He was bouncing, his hands in the air, like a boxer, winning, jeering his opponent. The crowd had risen to a dull roar of support in whatever endeavour this cunt was about partake in. And the thought of what that was made Sam feel like she was going to puke.

They were going to rape her. That much was obvious. But *he* was going to do it now.

Nanny waved the crowd quiet again.

There was that sound. Again. Weeping.

"Bring her forward." Nanny took Neil by the shoulder and led him across the stage to the side, and the other person, under burlap, was wheeled to the centre of the stage. They were on their feet. Sam could see their feet under the burlap walking as best they could, as two man dragged whatever it was under there.

When they stopped, Nanny gave them the nod, and they pulled back the burlap, letting it drop to the floor.

It was her mother.

Sam screamed, audibly, even through the gag, and she felt the skin from her throat flare as she did.

Lilian was head down in medieval stocks. A pillory framework, with holes for the wrists and head. An instrument of torture and humiliation. She was wearing a blindfold under the burlap, and a ball-gag. She was wearing the same dress that she wore when Sam had left the flat to go looking for the people upstairs. Whenever that was. Earlier today, probably. It was the red dress that her dad liked. It wasn't particularly revealing, but rather classy. Like *they* were. She pulled so hard against the cable-ties, she felt the plastic digging down to her bones. Her back arched from the gurney, and she convulsed her whole body back and forth like she was having an epileptic fit, trying to get free, trying to break something.

And where was her father?

A man—she paid him no attention at all—came around from the side of her, and slammed his fist into her gut. Sam stopped convulsing, and dropped limply against the binds, her knees falling away weakly from under her. She wanted to puke, but it hurt to breathe in, allowing her only the most shallow of breaths before pain stabbed at her, making her stop.

Sam couldn't move now. Not with any sense of purpose, anyway.

Nanny walked across the stage to Sam's mum, and pulled the blindfold from her. She looked around bucking against the stocks. Then her eyes landed on Sam and she tried to scream against the ball-gag, with nothing more than a muffle coming out. "A family reunion, of sorts," Nanny said. "And you, Neil, want to be part of the family?"

Neil pumped his hand up in the air and pulled off his shirt revealing his thin emaciated body beneath. He threw it out in the crowd like he was some sort of stripper.

Again, Nanny waved the crowd to a hush. She looked over to Sam. "What do you think honey?" she asked. "How about Neil be your new father?"

Sam tried to pull herself up, but in vain. Her mother was crying. She was watching Nanny, and Neil. Neil turned. He looked at Lilian. Walked

over and bent down so that his face was at the same height as hers. He slapped her, gently, on the cheek.

The crowd watched, hushed.

Nanny said, "Do you want to fuck?" She waved her hands up this time, riling the crowd. "Need some practice? This one's no good for anything else!"

Neil bounced again, hands up. "Yeah," he shouted over and over again.

He went to the side of the stage and came back with a blade. Sam couldn't see what it was exactly, but it was large—like a butcher's knife, or a cleaver. Neil went over to her mum and showed her the blade, making her cry out more, teasing her with it, Lilian unable to take her eyes from it.

The crowd lowered their cheers, becoming more jokey with each other, letting Neil do as he wanted, take his time. Let him *feel* his way. He rounded her and slapped her on the arse with the flat of the blade. She tried to move. She tried to scream. Neil crouched down used the knife to cut her dress up the back revealing her underwear. He laughed. Pinged them like he was on the school playground. He grinded against her like they were on a dance floor.

All the while he had that shit-eating grin on his face, enjoying every second of it.

He cut her underwear from her.

Lilian tried to shake her way from his grip but it was no good. He pushed himself against her, simulating fucking her. He laughed, his head back. Then he raised the knife and started making a chopping motion that brought the crowd back. They started cheering, and then a chant. *Fuck the bitch. Fuck the bitch. Fuck the bitch*. Over and over. Neil bent forward and placed the blade down on the stage directly below Lilian's face. Just so she could see it. So she could be scared of it.

He unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down. Even through his pants, Sam could see he was hard.

Sam was starting to feel weak. It was like her blood wasn't flowing to her head, and she was getting faint. It made it all seem somehow dream like.

Neil dropped his pants and the crowd went ape-shit. The roar was deafening, and did nothing more than add to the confusion that Sam felt.

He waved his hard cock in her mum's face, as she pulled away as far as she could. He slapped her cheek with it. The crowd were loving it.

Then he picked up the blade again. While he was down there, he said something to her, lost to the noise of the crowd.

Then he stood.

He used his free hand to unbuckle the ball-gag from her mum, and let it drop to the ground, holding on to the blade with the other.

She mouthed, *I love you*, to Sam and, nodded some sort of *It'll be okay*.

It wasn't going to be okay. It was already too late to be okay. Sam tried to mouth words back, but she couldn't close her lips, her own gag, deep in her mouth.

Neil waved the blade again and started to circle her mum. Naked. Hard.

Fucking animal cunt.

The Neil stopped, facing Sam. He waved the blade in her direction and said something but she couldn't hear what. It was probably a promise of similar to come to her. Then he turned back to her mum. He raised the blade, and hacked it down hard on the back of her mum's neck. The blade stopped violently as it tore between the vertebrae. Her mum went limp as blood gushed from the wound. Neil tried to lift the blade out, but it was struck fast in her neck. He raised his leg and leant it against the stocks.

He was still hard.

He used the extra leverage to pull the blade out, blood splattering his naked torso, splashing against his cock. On his face. Down his legs.

Sam couldn't look away.

He brought it up again, and the crowd's excitement rose. The blade slid through her mum's neck this time, free of the bone, and her head dropped to the stage in front of her.

Blood gushed out of her neck like it had been pent up. Then it evened to a flow as the pressure dropped. As the heart stopped. Neil slung the blade across the stage, it clattering on the floor.

He turned, and inserted his cock into Sam's mum's gaping neck. And he fucked her lifeless corpse, his bloody arsehole facing her, as the crowd cheered.

Sam heard Nanny ask the crowd something. She couldn't hear or wasn't listening. It didn't matter now. This had … this. The words, the thoughts weren't there.

Someone from the crowd got up on the stage and came around behind her mum. He dropped his trousers and although she couldn't see, she knew he was fucking her too.

Sam felt vomit rise in her stomach, pushing itself into her mouth. The taste of burning was vile and she tried to swallow it back, but she felt it seeping around the edge of the gag. Out onto her chin. Dripping down onto her body.

"Winner takes it all," Nanny shouted above the crowd.

Neil and the other cunt had a rhythm now, fucking spit-roasting her dead mother, until Neil pulled away first. She couldn't see amid the gore and the blood, and bits of hacked off flesh, *she didn't want to see*, but she assumed that Neil had cum first.

The crowd approved.

Sam couldn't hold her head up anymore. She slumped forward, held up by her binds, and closed her eyes.

C H A P T E R 7

Sam awoke looking at her father. They were back in the flat. Roger was sitting on one of their dining chairs looking at her. He had the gag this time. He was tied, his feet to the legs, his hands at the wrist to the arms of the chair, and he was naked.

Sam looked down at herself.

She was naked too.

Tied the same as he was to another chair. But no gag. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. She could feel a chipped tooth where the last gag had been forced into her while she was unconscious. She could taste the odious filth of bile in her mouth.

She strained to look around. They were in the living room. “Where are they?” she asked.

Her father shook his head. He made some effort to talk, but he couldn’t.

Then she remembered everything. It came flooding back and hit her like a shovel to the face. “Mum,” she said with a sharp intake of breath.

Roger lowered his head. He already knew. She just hoped for his sake that he didn’t see it.

Behind her, the toilet flushed, and the door to the bathroom opened. A man came out, tugging on his fly. “Fucking jeans,” he said. “Get what you pay for.” He was bald, and tanned—badly, with an itchy looking red patch disappearing from his neck into the v of his shirt. An earring in one ear. He walked in, between Sam and Roger, and looked from him to her. His eyes lingered on Sam’s body and he nodded some sort of approval. “Nice.”

Sam rolled the saliva in her throat up to her mouth and spat at him, gob reaching the bottom of his jeans.

“Save it for later, love.” He turned back to her father and walked around, behind him. He leaned down onto her dad’s shoulder’s, looking at Sam over the top of his head, with his arms draped on Roger. “Good looking girl, you got there, old man. *Spunky*.” He grinned at Sam chewing on some invisible gum. “But,” he continued. “We need to see if this is all going to work out.”

“What the fuck’s going on?” Sam screamed at him.

He raised an eyebrow. “Now, now.” He stood and took hold of Roger’s shoulders, massaging him like a prize-fighter waiting in the corner of the ring.

Her dad snapped his head back and forth trying to see what he was doing.

“I’m Peter, by the way. And I am here to establish whether you …” He slapped his hands down on Roger’s bare shoulders. “… are going to be any good to us.”

Sam’s father made muffled protests through the gag.

“I know, I know.” He walked around to his side and crouched, resting his hand on roger’s knee. “You see, we need new stock. And we haven’t been having much luck with that in the last few years.” He stood. “And our Nanny, bless her, decided that your little girl here is going to be our saviour. However …” He turned to face him. “… that means that you are going to have to do your bit too. Join the cause, so to speak. Do you understand?”

Sam watched as her father stared straight into the man’s eyes. He shook his head. Slightly.

Peter turned to face Sam. “I don’t think you understand,” he said, quietly. “That said, though, I do stand to lose a fiver if you so much as get a hard-on for your little girl.” Peter then walked from between the two of them and crossed the living room, going out into the corridor.

Sam’s father stared at her. He shook his head, and was crying now. He made no movement, no sound, but he wept.

“Dad …” She didn’t want to say the words, but she had to. “You’ve got to. They’re going to …” Her voice drifted off as she thought of the depravity her mother faced. “They’ll hurt you.”

He shook his head.

“Dad. You must.”

Peter came back into the room. He wasn’t alone. Two other blokes were with him, around the same height, build, a little younger maybe. “Right. Me and the boys here are ready for the show. No privacy in this tribe, mate. Up you get.”

Roger looked at Peter for a moment, his head shook from side to side slowly.

Peter met his shaking with nodding, and when nothing changed, he simply said, “Hold on.” He walked back out of the room, returning only a few seconds later with a set of rusty old garden shears, the sort used to trim hedges. “If you can’t get hard for your little girl, then you are no good to us.” He punctuated the sentence by snapping the shears closed a couple of times. “I will cut your cock off and feed it to your little girl while you watch, geddit?” He snapped the shears again.

“Dad,” Sam interrupted.

Roger looked at her.

“Focus. Close your eyes. Think of mum. Think of whatever you have to.”

He shook his head as he pissed himself.

“Then look at me,” she said. “Pretend I’m someone else. Someone you want to fuck.” She looked at Peter. He was starting to get agitated. Impatient. He was staring at her father, caring little to nothing about her. “Come on,” she continued. “You want to have it,” she said desperately. She pulled her legs open at the knees as far as they would go. “Fuck my cunt.” She said. “Fuck me like a whore.”

Still he protested, sitting in his own piss, his body jiggling as he cried harder, muted by the gag.

Sam looked at Peter. He was closer to her father. He’d moved. He wanted to win his fiver. He wanted to end this charade. Sam glanced at his friends. Both of them were paying her more attention than anything else in the room, getting turned on by her actions. She returned her attention to her father. He had his head dropped down onto his chest.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.” Peter reached the side of the chair. “Don’t want to fuck your little girl, do you?”

He shook his head, silently.

Peter looked at Sam. “Don’t take it personally,” he said. “These two want to fuck you. I think that Neil’s *going* to fuck you. Most everybody is *actually* going to fuck you. It’s just this dried up old cunt that doesn’t want to.”

“Fuck off, you—” Words failed her. She looked at her father again. “Dad,” she said quietly.

“Sorry, old man,” Peter said. He opened the shears just a little and slid them down into Roger’s crotch. Sam was grateful that they weren’t closer and that she’d be able to see more. She didn’t want to see more.

Then Peter snapped the shears closed.

After a second of silence, Sam’s father began to scream so loudly it rounded the ball-gag and could probably have been heard in the flat above. Blood erupted from between his legs, mixing with the piss at first and then overtaking it, dripping from the chair to the carpet, trickling down his legs. He bit down on the gag so hard, his front teeth cracked, and one split in half, splitting his gum and causing a torrent of blood from his mouth.

“Yee-haw,” Peter cawed. He reached down into Sam’s father’s lap and lifted his blood soaked, flaccid penis up like a dirty rag. “Cock-tastic,” he said, laughing.

Sam looked down at herself, suddenly aware of her nakedness, and that she was still holding her knees open for her father. She closed them. Snapped them shut. Peter cackled. One of the other two let out a disappointed grunt. Sam couldn’t stop herself from glancing in his direction.

She half expected to catch him having a wank.

Thankfully he wasn’t, but he saw her look and thrust his pelvis at her.

Her father still screamed. It filled the room.

“Shut the fuck up, old man,” screamed Peter at him. “It’s not like you were using it.” He tossed his penis to the carpet, only just shy of Sam’s feet, causing her to recoil in disgust. She edged her toes as far away as the binds that held her to the chair would allow. Peter punched Sam’s father, and he stopped screaming, his head jolting to the side and dropping. The pool of blood crawling across the carpet was vast. He had lost so much blood he was going pale.

“What do you want?” Sam managed to say. She was fighting her whole body’s desire to black out again. Sickness sat in her stomach. Her head swam.

"Right," Peter said. He straightened himself and passed the shears to his friends. One of them left the room with them and the other shook Peter's hand, nodding some shitty congratulatory wank at him like he'd just scored big in snooker. He turned to Sam's father and stood over him. He wasn't a big man, in either sense of the word. He was average height and a cunty waste of skin. But her father had never looked so small.

Peter took him by the chin and rolled his head around, admiring his face. Then he rested his head back and pulled his fist back. He punched him on the chin. Her father rocked in the chair, still unconscious. Peter did it again. There was a crack. A crunch. More teeth on the ball-gag Sam suspected.

She still fought to stay awake. She knew well enough what they had in store for her, but the last thing she could think of right now was waking up to find they'd already done it—or worse, that they were doing it there and then.

Peter punched him in the throat. A gurgle. Blood was rushing down her father's chin, onto his chest, his stomach, mixing with the congealing blood already on the chair. The carpet. He suddenly seemed to wake. He started coughing up the blood that was running down his throat. Choking.

Peter laughed, and stepped away. "This fucker's drowning in his own blood." He turned to Sam. "Daddy's little girl want a real man?"

"Fuck you," she said, not taking her eyes off her dad. Peter was right, she feared. He was barely conscious and drowning in his own blood. What of it that was left inside his body, that is.

Peter turned back to her father and lifted his face up again. He didn't even look at Peter, his eyes rolled in is head. He was no longer aware of his surroundings. He wasn't *really* awake. "Cunt," Peter said under his breath. He looked at Sam. "Don't go anywhere will you?" He laughed. His friend laughed.

They walked out of sight from the living room and Sam listened as the front door closed. She waited a few seconds. There was no sound at all. They'd left.

C H A P T E R 8

Sam writhed in the chair trying to get loose. “Stay with me, dad,” she kept saying. He’d stopped moving a few minutes ago. She didn’t know how long she had before Peter came back. Probably with Neil. The ropes she fought against now dug into the cuts she had from the cable ties on the gurney. It split them open. They bled fresh. “Fucking hell.” She tried kicking out. Break the chair. Something. Anything.

There was a crash from outside the living room. They were coming and Sam was still just as tied as she was. *I’m fucked*, she thought. *Literally*.

She still pulled against the ropes but it was doing no good. She didn’t take her eyes from the doorway, waiting to see who was coming first.

There was some movement, and a slight, scrawny young man stuck his head around the door. He looked at Sam’s father. “Holy shit,” he whispered. Then he saw Sam staring at him. “*Holy shiiiiiit*.” He came into the room. He was dirty. Tee and jeans that didn’t look like he’d changed them in a month. Hair was straggled, unkempt. He had dirt on his face. He was carrying a backpack and a hunting knife.

“Who the fuck are you?” Sam asked.

“Noah,” he whispered. “Keep your fucking voice down.” He dropped down next to her and started to cut away the ropes on her feet. “Let’s get you out of here. Before they come back.” He couldn’t stop himself from glancing at her body. As soon as he’d cut Sam free from the ropes she stumbled across the room to her father, bloody and ruined. She didn’t know what to touch, pawing at him softly, tears streaming down her face.

“He’s done for,” said Noah. “Come on, before they come back.”

“I love you, dad,” she whispered. She turned as Noah was leaving the living room, but instead of going for the front door he hooked a right into Sam’s bedroom. She followed.

Noah was in the room piling bits of bed up that he had knocked over when he’d climbed out of the vent in her room. “Get in. Quick.”

Sam grabbed the sweatshirt and shorts that were on the bed and threw them into the vent, crawling in naked, after them.

Noah crawled in backwards, covering the vent with pieces of the bed, and re-securing the vent cover. “Mind the drop in the dark,” he said. “There’s a ladder to the next floor. We’ll talk there.”

Sam pulled her clothes on before feeling carefully for the ladder. “How big is the drop?”

“Only about four metres.”

Only. Sam found the rungs and worked her way down.

The hatch into the vent was only just over a foot square. It had been a struggle for her to get in, but the vents themselves were larger, and allowed some rudimentary free movement. On the floor below, Noah reached the bottom of the ladder and overtook Sam. “Follow me,” he whispered. “Keep your voice down while we are out here.”

Sam followed him through the labyrinthine system of vents for a few minutes without word. She just wanted to keep moving forward and not think about the past.

Noah stopped and turned at a corner. He gestured for Sam to follow and he disappeared around. When Sam turned the corner she found herself in a small enclosure. A room just big enough for two adults to sleep in.

“Welcome to my abode,” he said, speaking normally. He waved for her to sit. “Make yourself at home.” He nodded at the walls, a gentle humming coming through them. “Best I can work out, this is the heart of the old central air. The motors still function, but it’s been shagged for years. Thankfully, the motors keep the noise out and vice versa. So they can’t hear us in here.” He stuck his hand out and Sam shook it. “So, yeah, Noah. You are?”

“Sam. I think someone was looking for you.” She remembered the guy that was being dangled out the window.

“I suspect so.” He grinned. Then he rummaged around in the stuff on the floor. It was clear he was living here. There was a dirty sleeping bag pushed up against the wall, and tins, packets, leftover food stuffs. He retrieved an open can of baked beans, fork sticking out the top. He offered it to her.

Sam shook her head.

He shrugged and started to eat.

"So," Sam wasn't sure what to ask first, so the words trailed off, and she started to cry. The tears flooded forward and she held her head in her hands.

Noah watched on, wordless.

After a few minutes the tears stopped. There were none left. She didn't want to stop, but her body couldn't make anymore. She slumped against the wall of the room, exhausted. "Talk to me," she said. "Who are you? What's going on?"

Noah sat back and put the bean can down. "Noah Miles. Occupant of Flat One Eight Eight, Lanner Court." He looked at her and smiled. "You stole my flat. I moved in in March, when the weather was bad, and I moved into the air vents in April. Been here ever since."

"Why haven't you left?"

"I can't. You'll see. The corridors are all on CCTV. These vents don't go as far as the edge of the building anywhere. I've tried to steal a phone and call for help." He picked a mobile phone from the clutter and tossed it to her. "Eight figure numerical password. And that's not the first one I've tried, either. They know I'm in here, I think. At least they know I'm in the building somewhere. Spanner in the works. They just can't find me."

"I saw them drop someone out the window on one of the higher floors. They were asking for you."

Noah looked sad. "Well. It's not like I had any mates here, so I don't know who they could have been asking."

Sam closed her eyes. "Who are they?"

"The Court of Lanner. Yes. Well. When I moved in, like you, I guess, I had no idea. They left me alone longer than you, by the look of it. As soon as you moved in your stuff I was watching from the vent in my—your—," he corrected himself, "—bedroom. As far as I can gather they're a bunch of inbreds. It's like a shit horror movie, except instead of being in a Louisiana swamp, we're in a fucked up block of flats in England. Nanny runs the place. There's a couple of higher level thugs, Fat Peter's the worst. Rapist cunt." He looked at Sam. "So what happened to your Mum?"

Sam looked at him. The tears had dried now. “They cut her in half and fucked the bits.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really am. At least I was alone. They tried to indoctrinate me into all this and I panicked. I think climbing in here was the only thing that’s kept me alive.”

Sam started to look around the floor. “You have any weapons?”

“I’ve got this.” He tapped the knife on his belt. “Found it one of the flats. I don’t know if anyone has missed it yet. Aside from that, not really. Why? You looking to find a way out—like I said, it’s not possible.”

“No,” she replied quiet calmly. “Finding a way out is a by-product. It’s an aside. What I’m going to do is kill every mother-fucking one of the cunts.”

C H A P T E R 9

"You're fucking crazy," said Noah.

"Are you going to help me, stop whining, or fuck off?"

"Fucking hell."

The two of them sat in the vents on the second floor at a grate overlooking the garbage shoot. Noah had spent two days showing Sam the building via the vents. Movement was hard and slow. "The garbage drops down to the basement, into commercial bins. They wheel them out once a week. It's the only way—apart from the stairs and the lift—down there. Vents stop here. No central air on the first floor, I guess. Or they botched the development," he pondered. "Look." He pointed along the corridor at head height. "CCTV cameras. They cover every corridor. Every. One."

Sam nodded. "I remember seeing cars parked over the entrance to the underneath car park."

"That's right. Keeps it locked down, I guess. But what good will being in the basement do? The entrance is shuttered."

Sam raised her eyebrows. "Yeah. Just formulating." She turned and started back towards the ladder that led to the next floor up, muttering something about Die Hard. As they climbed, she asked, "Tell me about the people here. I'm only seeing a few of them in the corridors."

"Yeah," whispered Noah from the ladder behind her. "It's like, there's Nanny, and her Prince's or General's, whatever, and a small arm of helpers. Thirty, forty? Aside from that there's the workers, and the women. Most everyone is related. Some of them are disabled. They're all fucking sick. When I was first in here, I got into one of the flats of one of the women. She was heavily preggo. I thought she'd be ideal to help me escape—I was sure she was here as a fucking baby machine." He laughed, climbing over to the next level and following Sam towards the next ladder. "She stabbed me in the fucking shoulder with a paring knife. A fucking *paring* knife."

"What did you do?" Sam got onto the next ladder.

"Punched her in the face."

Sam nodded. *Seems reasonable*. “I need to rest.” She stopped at the next level and sat with her legs over the drop waiting for Noah. He joined her and sat with her. “I stink,” she said.

“Yeah. Comes with the territory I’m afraid. There’s squirt at home. Nicked it.”

Sam smiled. “Squirt,” she echoed. “Come on, then.” She got up to her knees. “Let’s go and get some squirt.”

“Cheeky.”

Sam watched silently from the vent grate. She was alone. Noah had been sleeping when she left. She was on twenty-four. It was the middle of the evening. She was chewing the sausage roll that she had recovered from the bin in one of the flats that was empty. It tasted like shit and she was wondering if that was because it was out of the bin or if it was vegan.

Nanny was sitting in the living room watching Eastenders.

Sam could just see her without opening the vent. She could see her arm and shoulder, the top of her head, from where she was sitting. She could see more of the TV and the sofa next to it, than Nanny herself.

She couldn’t tell what room the vent opened into. It wasn’t the bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen. Second bedroom, being used for storage, maybe? She turned her attention back to Nanny. *Cunt must die*, she thought. She stuffed her mouth with another bite of dodgy pastry avoiding the ‘meat’. Even if it was a pork sausage roll the quantity of meat in it was probably negotiable.

The doorbell went. Sam tensed, stuffing the food into the satchel she had around her shoulder and pulling Noah’s hunting knife out in its place.

Nanny got up and shambled out into the corridor, passing the doorway where Sam hid and going to the front door. Sam listened.

“Hello, come in,” Nanny said.

There was a shuffling. Movement. Then Neil came into view. He was wearing a mock-leather jacket and jeans. A peak cap with NY written on it. Like this piss-ant had ever travelled further than fucking Tesco. He turned back to Nanny, still out of sight. He removed his hat like he was visiting the hospital, holding it to his chest.

“Come on,” Nanny spoke again. She shuffled across toward the living room again. “Quick chat?” Nanny went to the chair she was sitting in and picked up the remote, muting the programme.

Neil joined her and sat on the sofa. He looked nervous. The confidence he had when he fronted Sam in the car park, that he had when … he fucked her mum’s corpse … gone. He looked like a withered child. A boy.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” Nanny continued.

Sam couldn’t see Nanny as well as Neil. He nodded, caressing the peak of his cap. “S’all right,” he said before he looked down.

“We need to sort it out though. The boy’s are looking for the little whore. She will be found.”

They’re talking about me.

“Yeah. I know.”

Nanny pushed herself up to her feet. She shuffled across to Neil and sat next to him, resting her hand on his knee. “You must be disappointed, but when she is found you can still have her.”

This seemed to cheer him up. He smiled and nodded, looked back up. “Yeah,” he nodded enthusiastically. “I was just ready, you know.”

“I know,” she said. “Why don’t you stand up?”

Neil nodded and did as she suggested. He began to look nervous again.

Sam gripped the knife tighter, fixated.

Nanny reached around, using his hips to turn him to face her. She pulled his jeans open, struggling with fingers gnarled by arthritis, and yanked them to the floor. Neil rested his head back, looking to the ceiling as she pulled down his pants. “Look at me,” she said. He obeyed.

She stroked his cock. Took it and squeezed. It flexed in her hand, twitching, getting harder.

“Nanny,” he said.

“Calm,” she replied. She started to stroke it properly. Wanking him like a fucking sixteen year old on the back seat of the bus.

“Nanny,” he said, this time more urgently.

“You wait, you impatient little fuck.”

They stared into each other’s eyes.

“I’m gonna …” he said.

“If you do,” she said, letting the threat hang.

Neil grunted and spunk shot out over Nanny’s hand and to the carpet in front of him.

“You wasteful cunt,” she said, flicking it from her hand. She took a handkerchief and wiped herself with it. Then she slapped his balls. Hard. He flinched forward, and as he bent, she grabbed his ear like a scolding school teacher. She whispered something in his ear that Sam couldn’t hear.

“Yes, Nanny.” Neil pulled up his pants and his jeans, and then got to his knees. He put his hands behind his back and bent forward and started to lap up his cum from the carpet with his tongue.

Sam couldn’t stop herself from making a wretch noise. It just came out. She slapped her hand over her mouth, holding her breath.

Neither of them seemed to notice.

She returned the knife to her satchel and felt the sausage roll. *Oh God*. She backed away from the grate and to the ladder. The last thing she needed to do was to alert them by puking.

C H A P T E R 1 0

"So what's the plan?"

"A little bit of winging. I noticed yesterday that they've cleared our flat out. Again. Even took your blood soaked mattress this time. Fuckers. I nabbed a Stanley knife from where they were boxing things up." She took the knife from her back pocket and tossed it to the floor in front of Noah, still laying on his sleeping bag. "I've noticed that the bloke in eleven-oh-one is working odd shifts. The flat will be empty today, until about ten-thirty. Just out of interest, where did that blood come from on your mattress?"

"I got into a fist fight with one of Peter's boys the day I disappeared in here, and beat his brains in. You could say I was *venting*." He grinned at Sam.

She shook her head.

"Suit yourself." Noah looked at his watch, and shrugged. "So we only a few hours. What we doing?"

"I'm going to ransack his flat now."

Noah pulled himself up to sit. "You're fucking crazy."

Sam smiled. "Aye, so you keep telling me. You coming?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you want to have any fun."

Sam kicked the vent off in into eleven-oh-one's bedroom. The door was open into the hallway, and the place was empty.

"Careful," Noah hissed. He followed Sam out into the room and picked the vent from the carpet. "If it's too badly damaged, we won't be able to put it back. They'll know we've been here."

Sam shrugged. "By the time this fuck gets home from work they're already going to know." She went from the bedroom into the hall. One bedroom. She went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet above the sink and cleared a shelf into the sink with one hand.

“What are you looking for?” Noah was at the door, his voice an urgent whisper.

“I’ll know when I see it.” She glanced around the bathroom and then left, passing Noah and going to the kitchen. She lifted the satchel from her shoulder and placed it down on the kitchen counter top, flipping the lid open. She took the cleaver from the knife block and admired the blade. She placed it into the satchel. Then the chef’s knife. She slid the paring knife from the base of the block and handed it to Noah, still watching.

He snorted. “Very funny.”

She shot him a smile, and opened the cupboards under the sink. Bleach. She took it and handed it to Noah. “Hold on,” he said. He bent down next to her. “I don’t know what your plan is for this, but …” He placed the bleach back and picked up the drain cleaner. “This stuff is worse.”

Sam nodded and took it from him, and the spray can of oven cleaner. “This stuff smells like shit. I wonder what it tastes like?”

“Gross,” Noah stood. “What else?”

“This’ll do for here.”

“So now where?”

Sam smiled and pointed downwards.

They returned to the vents and went down three floors. It was hard work, but Noah was used to it and Sam was riding on adrenaline. Sam took Noah to the end of a vent. It led out into a living room on the eighth floor. The room was dirty. No one had cleaned for some time. There was a rug that looked gritty. The wallpaper was hanging off on the wall next to the armchair that faced the TV. Sam turned back to Noah and raised her finger to her lips. *Hush*. She carefully removed the vent grate, and crawled out into the room.

Noah followed her out and rested his hand on her arm, frowning at her.

She smiled a little. Only a little, but she gave a small tilt of the head to the side to signal that she knew what she was doing. She nodded for him to follow her.

They walked silently across the living room and to the entrance hall. It was a tiny square with four doors coming from it. Opposite them was the

door to the corridor outside the flat. To the left was the kitchen. To the right was an open door to a bedroom, and from in there was the door to an ensuite toilet. The whole flat had a stale smell to it. Cigarettes and cheap booze. A strong lager smell.

As they reached the door to the bedroom the smell changed to a bodily stench. Sweat. Cum.

Sam walked into the bedroom first and stopped, still, at the end of the bed. She looked at Neil, sleeping. He was laying on his side, one knee up in the foetal position and the other our straight. Noah joined her, his eyes wide. He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. *Are we going to do this?* he was saying.

Sam nodded. Yes. Yes they were.

Sam pulled the chef's knife from the satchel and went to the head of the bed. She touched the point of the knife into Neil's cheek, pushing oh, so gently. He made a grumbly mumble and raised his hand to his face. She moved the knife so that he wouldn't feel it, and when his hand returned to next to him, he turned onto his back and let out a sigh.

Still his eyes remained closed.

His hand slipped into his pants, and he tugged on his cock.

Any joviality that was in Sam's face until now dropped and she took the knife and rested it, blade flat, on his mouth.

He opened his eyes and tensed to move.

"If you move," Sam said, "or make a sound, I will slit your throat."

He didn't move. Frozen. Paralysed in fear. His hand still on his cock.

She looked at his pants. "You were thinking of me?"

Neil looked around wildly. He was trying to find a way out. An escape. He looked at Noah stood at the end of the bed with some recognition. Noah smiled at him. "Well?" he asked.

Neil focussed back on Sam. He clearly didn't know what to answer for the best.

"Or were you thinking of my mum?"

His eyes widened.

“It had better have been me,” she said. She lifted the knife from his face. “Well?”

Neil nodded. “Yes. You,” he said. He still hadn’t released his cock from his fist. He’d probably forgotten it was there.

Sam glanced back down to it. “Show me,” she said.

Neil looked confused. His eyes flicked to Noah, who just shrugged.

She tapped the steel blade back down onto his face twice, impatiently. “Now.”

Neil let his cock go, took his pants in his hand, and pulled them down to free himself. He was at half-mast.

Sam smiled. “Is this shit actually turning you on?”

Neil let the edge of his mouth curl up.

“You fucking sicko.” She stepped down the bed so she was at his waist. He watched her. She passed the knife to Noah. “If he moves, cut him.”

Noah took the knife and went around the other side of the bed and towards his head, pointing the knife at Neil like he was preparing to fence. He looked a little confused as to what the plan was.

Sam sat. She took Neil’s cock in her hand and gently stroked it. She felt him tense every muscle. “I can see you like that. Been waiting for me, I hear.” Noah shot her a glance, but she ignored him. “Do you know what I like to do?”

Neil shook his head. He looked terrified, but had still managed to gain a hard cock.

“I like to be in charge.” She smiled and let his cock go free. “Do you understand what that means?” She spoke to him like she was addressing a child.

He shook his head.

“It means I like to fuck men. You want me to do that?”

Neil looked at Noah who just stared at him. A blend of confusion and disgust sat on his face. Neil wasn’t sure, but he managed a small nod. “How?” he whispered.

Sam grinned. “Ah, such an unaccomplished young man. You ever seen a woman with a dildo, fucking herself on a porn video?”

He nodded, a smile bursting onto his face.

"It's like that. But with your arse."

His eyebrow dipped as he processed what she was saying. Then he nodded slowly.

"So whatcha got?" She stood, giving his cock a gentle slap of encouragement. Over at the chest of drawers he had against one wall, she pulled the top drawer open. Porn mags. No surprise there. She looked in the next. Empty. The next, a smattering of unused hygiene products and some dirty clothes. Some rolling papers and a lighter. Tobacco and some weed. "Wow," she whispered, pocketing the lighter and the weed. "You really are a piece of work." She turned back to the room. "Not a lot there, is there?" She left Noah standing there over Neil with a hard cock. She made a mental note to thank him later, as this was probably more than a little uncomfortable for him. She went across to the kitchen and looked around. It was sparse. A couple of knives. Spoons. Forks. Plates, chipped. And everything was dirty. It smelled worse in here than in his bedroom. "Fuck's sake," she muttered.

She picked up an empty white cider bottle off the counter.

Walking back into the bedroom, the scene hadn't changed except Neil wasn't quite as excited. "Let's see what we can do," she said smiling. "Get onto your knees, face the wall."

Again, Neil looked unsure, but he obliged.

As soon as he was on all fours, naked, facing the wall, Noah mouthed to Sam, *What the fuck?* She winked at him. She came up on Neil and slapped him on the arse. "You know what a reach-around is?" She got on the bed behind him and grinded her pelvis against his arse, simulating fucking him, just like he'd done to her mum. She slapped his cock, as the fingers on her other hand teased his arsehole. She took the cider bottle and gently eased it into his arse. He let out a little whine. A whimper. But then he pushed back against it. He was enjoying it. She looked at Noah who was transfixed on the whole situation. He was staring at nothing like he'd checked out.

Sam clicked her fingers at him and waved for the knife.

He snapped back to her and passed it over. She smiled, easing the bottle out, and Neil made a noise like he had cum, then Sam lined up the chef's

knife and pushed it to the hilt into his arsehole.

Neil's back arched, and he released a little grunt as if he didn't like what had just happened but didn't know if that was part of what was supposed to be happening.

Then he screamed.

"Shut him up," Noah blurted, bringing his hand back and laying a punch into the side of Neil's head.

Sam twisted the knife to the left and Neil stopped screaming. "You killed my mum, you ugly virgin cunt." She twisted it to the right.

Neil reached up and felt his stomach. He grunted and twisted, falling onto the bed. Sam let the knife go. He rolled onto his side, cradling his gut like he was going to puke. Blood started to piss from his cock, watery at first, then getting darker. She'd punctured his bladder with the knife.

"The fuck," Noah said. He looked at the door, as if he expected someone to burst through.

Sam looked at him. "He fucked my mum's gaping neck hole," she said, somewhat exasperated. "Did you think I was actually going to peg him?" She reached down and pushed Neil over, withdrawing the knife roughly. He coughed, and moaned, and blood started to come out of his mouth. Just a little. "Little bitch," she said. She grabbed his cock and held it. He wasn't in any shape to stop her. "Not so hard now, are you?" She laughed, letting him go. She rounded the bed and went to the head of it. She roughly rolled him onto his back. "Here," she said. "Suck this." She jammed the knife into his mouth.

He tried keeping his mouth shut, but she stabbed the blade into his teeth. "Take it." As his teeth chipped away, blood choking him, Sam could see that he was crying.

She stopped. "Baby."

The bed was soaked in blood now, coming from all of his orifices. Blood now gushed from his cock with no control.

She turned and stabbed the knife into his throat, from the side. He froze. She pulled it out, blood now letting from there and not his mouth. Then she stuck it in again.

Noah and turned away, no longer interested in watching. He had his head in his hands.

Sam withdrew the knife again, and while Neil was still conscious, he had stopped moving, any fight he had left draining out onto the bed around him. She took the knife and started to hack at his neck. The blade sliding in with ease at first, slipping through the vocal cords and the larynx, above his Adam's apple. He stopped breathing when Sam broke through into the oesophagus. She started sawing as the blade hit the bones of the spine, but she found a gap in them, cutting down, through the spinal cord, and finally to the bedsheets. She pushed his head away and from the bed like a cat pissed off at a glass of wine. It landed on the carpet with a light plop.

"One down," she said. "Many to go."

And Noah puked on the carpet.

C H A P T E R 1 1

“It stinks,” Sam said, taking the next ladder up.

“I didn’t mean too.” Noah spat puke leftovers onto the floor of the vent as he followed.

Sam sighed. “Come on. Plenty more floors to go, and no time to waste.”

They reach eighteen and stopped to rest. Sam dangled her feet over the side of the ladder and waited for Noah to catch her up. He’d been moving slowly, and she wasn’t sure if it was the puke or the murder that had taken the wind from his sails. She kicked her legs back and forth mimicking her actions from when she was on the swing set in the old back garden. Better days.

She held her hand out and Noah took it, rising up and sitting next to her. It was a bit of a squash, the two of them together, but it worked. “What’s next?” he asked, huffing.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded, waving his hand in front of his face.

“Nanny,” Sam continued. “Cut the head off the snake.”

“You think that’s a good idea? It puts us a long way up.”

She smiled and patted his knee. “Scared?”

“Nah.” He laughed nervously as he spoke.

“Well, you should be.” She let her hand rest on his leg gently. “It’ll be fine. They won’t find Neil for a while, it’s still early.”

“Give me five minutes, then,” he said. He hung his head low while catching his breath, letting the thoughts of Neil fade. “So, as this appears to be the big push, so to speak …” he thought about how to finish the sentence.

“Well?”

He rested his hand on his arm, matching where her scars were. “We’ve been holed up together for a few days now, and I didn’t know whether to ask or not.”

Sam snorted. “Medical school,” she said.

“They’re not supposed to practice on you.” He grinned, trying to lighten the mood, perhaps wishing he hadn’t asked.

Sam shook her head. “First year student. I barely got through anatomy. Couldn’t cope with the pressure, and this seemed to help.” She ran her fingers across the lines she’d made with a razor blade. “Then dad pulled me out.”

Noah rested his hand on hers. “What you gonna do when we get out of here?” he asked, changing the subject.

Sam stared down the vent. She hadn’t even thought about it. She’d been in this vent system eating shit discarded by scum for a week, and all she had thought about was retribution. The look on her mum’s face as she mouthed that she loved her was etched onto the back of eyelids and she saw it every time she closed her eyes. When she slept, she had nightmares about being forced to ask her dad to fuck her as he bled out on cheap carpet. What next?

“Go home,” she said, suddenly. “Back to Camden. You?”

Noah shook his head. “Funny really. I’ve been in here so long that I don’t know what I’d do with enough space to stand upright without looking over my shoulder.”

“Come with me,” she said, squeezing his leg. “We’ll work it out together.”

“Probably should contact my brother. No idea if he thinks I’m alive or dead.” He looked at her, and then rested his head on her shoulder. “But together.”

“Right then. Deal.” She gently moved out from under him. “Come on then. Let’s get this done.”

The two of them started off again. Along the vent, and onto the next ladder going up.

Watching from the vent grate, Noah lay next to Sam. She was watching through, out into the flat. They could hear Nanny doing something in the kitchen and the TV was running to itself. Noah’s focus was on the vent floor. “Have you been spending time here?” he asked, quietly.

Sam looked at him, then the vent floor. The crumbs from all the food she'd consumed, laying here, hour after hour, waiting. Watching. "A little. Pay attention." She turned back to look out of the vent.

"Now," he whispered. "I'm afraid to ask again, but do you have a plan?"

"For this one, I do. Wait for her to come back." She nodded at the TV. "Old cunt is making breakfast."

They waited. Sam was right, Nanny could be heard preparing food in one of the other rooms. The smell of toast drifted across the flat. Bacon. Coffee. It was driving Sam insane smelling it, and when she looked at Noah his face was contorted. "Patience," she said. "We will infiltrate and liberate the bacon."

"Coffee," he said. "Hot. Coffee."

"That too."

Nanny shuffled across the doorway carrying a disabled slip-proof tray in one hand. She rested it on the coffee table in front of the chair and sat down. She picked up the remote and turned the sound on the TV.

That was cue Sam was waiting for. She eased the vent open quietly, and crawled out, sliding the cleaver from her satchel in one silent movement. Noah followed.

"Heh." Nanny was engrossed in the TV.

The room was full of cardboard boxes. Storage. Sam quickly looked in the top of one of the open ones. Car stereos. The one next to it, toys. It looked like some Ebay empire. Fucking hell. Sam reached the door out into the hallway, looking to the right. The layout was different to the others she had been in yet again. Who had designed this fucking place? H. H. Holmes? There were two closed doors in the hall, one must be the bedroom and the other the bathroom. The door to the kitchen was open.

Sam crossed the hall to the living room doorway and waited while the sound from the TV lulled. As soon as the volume rose, she went in, followed by Noah. Sam crept up behind Nanny's chair, and looked at the top of her head. The temptation to take the cleaver and slam it into the top of her head was great, but not the plan. She glanced at the TV. Some morning cookery show. They announced an ad break and the screen went black for a few seconds.

Sam stared at the reflection of herself and Noah stood over Nanny while the screen was black.

Nanny looked at the screen in silence—able to see them just as clearly. "Well," she said quietly. "Look at what the cat dragged in."

Sam rounded the chair holding the cleaver up. "You keep your cunt mouth shut," she said to the old woman.

Nanny simply smiled. "As you wish."

"Now you give me one good reason not to kill you." Sam had no intention of walking away and leaving the old woman alive.

"I thought you wanted me to keep my cunt mouth shut?" She smiled, smugly.

Noah came around the side of the chair and picked up a slice of bacon from the plate, untouched on the coffee table. He slipped it into his mouth. "Nice."

Nanny looked at him and smiled. It was a look of relief, as if she had just found the set of car keys she lost a week ago. "Hello, Noah," she said. "Looking good."

Noah chewed for a second and then picked up her coffee, carefully taking a sip, not used to the hot liquid. He picked up the butter knife from the plate and held it under her chin in the folds of the loose skin. "Lady asked a question," he said.

Nanny turned her smile to Sam. "Yes, she did. Didn't she? What was it? Why should you not kill me? Well." She thought for a second, and then pursed her lips, shaking her head. She looked up, brightly. "I can't think of a single one. You know, I've have a good innings, as they say. Cricket term, I believe. How do you want to do it? Cleaver, I see. Going to hack my head off? It's a little gauche, but it'll work." She started to pull herself from the armchair. "On the bed? It'll be easiest."

"Shut the fuck up." Sam pushed her back into the seat.

"Keep your voice down," whispered Noah. "These walls aren't that thick."

"No one heard us butchering Neil, did they?" Sam asked, returning the smug look that Nanny had given her.

Nanny looked down and gave a little look to the side. “Oh well. He wasn’t my favourite grandson.”

Sam lowered the blade a little. “Your grandson?” her voice wavered.

Noah looked at her, sticking another piece of bacon into his mouth. “What’s the problem?” he asked with his mouth full.

Sam felt her stomach tighten with nausea. “I saw her wank him off.”

Noah’s mouth dropped open. “*Fuuuuuuuck*.”

Nanny looked at him. “Oh no. I save that for my favourites.”

Sam swallowed the vomit back. She hefted the cleaver up over her head and brought it down as hard as she could on Nanny’s lower arm, just above the wrist of her hand, resting on the arm of the chair. The blade cut straight through the ulna and radius bones, cleaving it from the rest of the body. Nanny looked at it, stunned, for a moment, as her wrist and hand dropped from the arm of the chair onto the floor. “My wanking hand,” she said. Blood spurted quickly from the arm and then turned to a dribble. The initial spurt landed on Noah’s jeans. He turned and spat out his bacon.

“Fucking hell. This lot are worse than I thought.”

Then Nanny screamed. It was a short, sharp, shrill shriek, that to be expected of a little old lady.

“She’ll bleed out in a few minutes, if there’s more than saw dust in her veins.”

Then the door to the bedroom opened in the hallway. Peter came out, naked apart from a towel around his waist. He was impressively cut for someone with the nickname *fat*. He looked at Sam and Noah, confusion turning to horror as he saw the blood on the carpet. And Nanny’s wanking hand. Sam wondered for a moment what concerned him most, before slapping Noah’s stomach as she took off toward the hallway, straight at Peter. She heard Noah follow and the two of them were in the hall and turning into the storeroom before Peter had time to react, stunned from the scene he had walked into.

Sam hooked into the storeroom and dropped to her knees, clambering into the opening of the vents. The last thing she wanted was to face off against someone who looked like they could snap her in half with one hand. She scrambled along into the vent and turned to pull Noah, finding he

wasn't there. "Noah," she shouted, no longer concerned with stealth. A shadow became a face as Peter leaned down and looked into the vent.

"Noah's tied up. Why don't you come back and give him a hand?"

"Shit." Sam couldn't think. Instinct kicked in and flight won over fight. There was no way that she was going to be able to get out of the vent and stand a chance against Peter. He would mash her skull to powder before she gotten a blade to his skin. She was already on the ladder going down to the next floor, when she stopped. *Noah*. She climbed back up to twenty-four and clambered along to one of the small vents that opened out into the corridor outside the lift. She waited for what felt like an eternity before the lift *dinged*, and two men got out. They were in a hurry, leaving the lift and running to Nanny's front door.

Peter opened it, dressed now. Sam wondered if they all knew that Peter and Neil were both having fucking sexual relations with their grandmother. And also, how many of these other cunts were her grandkids? The two men went into the flat and returned, dragging Noah, unconscious, towards the lift. Peter slammed the door and followed them. The lift had gone, been called down to another floor, so they waited.

"That fucking bitch," Peter was saying. "She and this twat killed Nanny."

Good, Sam thought.

The goons with him paid lip service to their feelings, saying what a good old bird she was and how she would be missed. Then the lift arrived. They got in.

"Basement," Peter said. Then the doors closed.

At least he's still alive.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Sam moved as quickly as she could. She was already tired, long before she had to hit the ladders, dropping down twenty or more floors. She got to two. The bottom of vent system. Made her way to the grate that overlooked the garbage shoot to the basement that Noah had shown her. Exhausted, she hoped that she wasn't too late.

She knew that this was going to be the last push. As soon as she left the vent here, she was going to be on CCTV for anyone watching. Maybe they wouldn't see her? Maybe they'd be doing something else.

Maybe they'd be in the basement with Noah.

Noah.

Sam swung her whole body around and raised her feet up to the grate. This vent came out at the top of the wall, not at ground level. It was going to make a noise. She kicked both feet against the grate, pushing it from the wall and to the floor. It crashed loudly when it landed, and Sam didn't even know if anyone was going to be standing there. She couldn't see much.

She pulled the cleaver. It was the blade with the most heft. Scooting forward, she pushed herself out of the vent and landed awkwardly on her feet, stumbling like a baby deer. She swung around half expecting someone to be charging at her. Nothing. No one.

She hurried over to the garbage shoot. Pushed the flap open and looked down. It stank of rotten food. And she could hear noise. Noise of people coming from down there. She slipped the cleaver back into the satchel and raised herself up, lifting herself into the shoot, feet first.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered.

She left go and dropped down into the shoot. It was a sudden rush as she freefell for a second and then hit a slide, breaking her fall and slowing her for a couple more seconds, before she slid out of the shoot, into freefall again, and landed in one of the commercial wheelie bins in the basement. She sat stunned for a moment while becoming aware of her surroundings. She was in the trash, the walls of the bin high enough that she couldn't see out. At least that meant that they couldn't see her sitting there like a kid on the crapper. She could hear them, but the landing had left her numb, and

with a strange underwater sensation to her hearing. Several? Lots? It was hard to tell. As the numbness subsided, she recovered her hearing as well, and the feeling of being underwater slowly cleared. There was pain in her upper leg. Near her gracilis muscle. She closed her eyes and hoped she hadn't broken her leg, or torn the muscle. That would probably sign her death warrant here and now.

She waited until she felt more like herself before looking.

There was a needle sticking out of her. A long one. "Fuck," she whispered. Needles didn't both her—never had—but having some dirty fucking addicts shit hanging out of her wasn't *exactly* ideal. She reached down and pulled it out carefully. She managed not to snap the needle off in her leg. It stung, probably infected already—she *was* sitting in almost literal shit—but fuck it. That was a problem for another day.

She wiped what she hoped was cold curry from her arm and crawled over to the edge of the bin, looking over the lip.

She was in the basement—it was where the stage was—where they'd … to her mum. She backed away a little, and turned, leaning her back against the edge of the bin. She listened. There was commotion, but she could tell what was happening.

Pull your shit together, she thought, chiding herself. *That poor fucking guy risked his life to save you. What would it be like if he hadn't? Broken cunt and pregnant*. She nodded to herself. She went to the back of the bin, and climbed, out of sight of the crowd to the floor of the car park. She limped a little, trying to shake the fall and the needle out of her joints.

From the edge of the bin she could see more of what was going on, shrouded in the darkness, cover given by being in the far corner of the basement.

The stage stood against one wall. There was a crowd about it. Maybe ten of them? Again, it was all men. It was like some fucking boys club down here. Peter was on the stage. So was Noah. He was tied to a chair, just like her father had been. At least they hadn't stripped him. The stocks were still there, in the corner of it, cover by a bloody sheet. Sam hoped her mother wasn't still under there. *Surely not after all this time*.

Further away from her, on the opposite side of the basement—a wide expanse covering the footprint of the building, held up by reinforced

concrete stanchions—was the shuttered exit. The height of the ceiling and wide enough for two cars to pass. The shutter was down, and Sam expected there was at least two cars parked on the outside of it.

It was hard to see the final wall—the one to her left and opposite the stage—there were stanchions in the way, but she could see the door to the stairwell and the lift in the far corner. There were a number of cars parked down here, surprisingly. They varied in age, but mostly seemed to be in storage. She saw their estate car in one of the spaces near the exit. She scrunched her face up wishing she had the keys for it.

She then looked back to Noah. He was starting to regain consciousness. He was looking around wide-eyed. He wasn't trying to get free, and Sam wondered if it was because he knew there wasn't any point, or if he was paralysed with fear. Maybe he was just thinking about how much better off he was before *she* turned up. She pulled the cleaver from the satchel and crossed to the safety of being behind a car. She looked around the garage. She needed something other than a cleaver to deal with at least ten of them.

There were enough cars that she could make her way around most of the garage without being seen. She started off in the direction of the lift. They didn't seem to be doing anything to Noah. *Yet*. Staying to the shadows as much as she could, she went along the wall. There were wooden pallets. From deliveries? She continued. Petrol cans. She lifted one. It had liquid in it. Probably siphoned off the cars after they'd been put down here to rot. Can't sell them, after all, not after you've inducted their owners into your incestuous tower block cult. She thought of her dad. *Or killed them*.

She continued around. There was an old security guard's office in the corner. It looked untouched since the eighties. The door was leaning against the wall next to it, and the small windowed office smelt of shit. There was a desk in there. A broken chair. The seat had been ripped off, making it look like a toilet. Maybe it was, judging by the smell. There was an old rotary phone of the desk. Sam crept in, staying low and picked up the receiver. There was a dial tone. She could end it now. She put her finger in the dial and twisted. It didn't move. Stuck together, glued? Rusted to fuck? Who knew? She replaced the receiver silently, and the phone gave off a little *ting*. She left the office. She was close to the stairs now.

The thought of fleeing crossed her mind again. Up the stairs and out the front door. Simple. But it wouldn't be, would it? Like the front door of the

block would be open with them knowing she was on the loose.

She slid up on the side of a car and looked over to the stage. There was a little growing excitement, but she couldn't hear anything that was being said from here.

Then the door to the stairs opened and two young men came out. One of them screamed, *oi, oi, mutha-fucks*, his hands in the air. The two of them passed so close to Sam she could almost smell them.

They didn't see her. Their attention taken by the lit area surrounding the stage.

She watched them walk over, their *banter* being a mixture of taunts, insults, and camaraderie. Peter waved them on.

Sam stayed low and moved from car to car back the way she had come. She got to the petrol cans and started to quickly lift them. They all had something in them, from dribbles, to half full. She took two of them back to the lift and opened them. She sniffed the liquid to make absolutely sure it was petrol, before laying the two of them down, letting them leak over the floor. The petrol smelt strong. She wouldn't have long before anyone was alerted. And none at all, if someone else came out of the stairwell or the lift.

She went back, got two more, then went back to the first two cans, pouring more over the floor, creating a chain around the wall from the stairs back to the bins. When the last can lay emptying at her feet beneath the car in front of the bin, there was a sudden hush from the crowd.

She stopped. Held her breath. Had they heard her?

"Brothers," said Peter, standing at the front of the stage. The others had crowded around in a small semi-circle. "Nanny had left us." He dropped his head and put his hands together in remembrance. "She was a good lay." There was a hush over them. Some of them were looking around, horror on their faces at the surprise of her death, some with their heads bowed in respect. No one seemed surprised that Peter had been fucking her.

Well, thought Sam.

She took Neil's lighter from her pocket.

"And this piece of shit," Peter continued, "is responsible." He waved over to Noah. "Him and his little bitch."

Sam watched.

Peter walked over to the stocks and pulled the bloody cover from it. Thankfully they were empty. He dragged them into the middle of the stage. He was going to put Noah in them.

Sam rolled the spark wheel on the lighter. It was old, clunky, but it went round. No spark though.

Peter and one other roughly untied Noah. He struggled against them, but was no match for Peter's bulk alone, and not when he had help. They took him to the stocks and opened them forcing his head down into the centre hole and putting his wrists in the other two, clamping the wood down on him, trapping him.

They would kill him next, Sam thought, thumbing the wheel again. Nothing. "Fucking come on, you piece of shit," she whispered.

Peter came around to the front of Noah. He address the crowd. "What should we do with him?"

Kill him, came a voice. *Fuck him up*, came another. *Fuck him*, came the third.

Peter pointed into the crowd with one hand and touched his nose with the forefinger of his other hand. His undid his belt buckle and let it drop open.

C H A P T E R 1 3

Peter stood on the stage, his trousers around his ankles. Sam now knew why he was called Fat Peter. Noah was staring at the man's flaccid cock in silent horror, his mouth wide open. Peter turned to Noah and pointed at the python between his own legs.

Sam could see Noah was crying, and this was revving the crowd up further. She tore her thumb down the spark wheel and the lighter fired. The flame launched upwards, almost taking her eyebrows off. "Fuck it," she muttered. She took a step back from the petrol all over the floor and tossed the lighter into it.

There was a loud pop as the vapour combusted before the flame reached the petrol, and then the blue and yellow flame rose. It wasn't large or impressive, but it moved quicker than Sam was expecting.

The flame flew across the floor of the basement, licking into the cars it passed, and illuminating the darkness in its wake.

It got Peter's attention quickly, as it reached the first of the laying down canisters, catching and exploding.

It wasn't like a Hollywood film—the room didn't shake. There wasn't a sudden wall of flame. There was a deafening crack that cut through the basement, as the canister was torn apart, and the petrol leapt up onto the cars and wall around it. Then the same happened to the next one.

Sam watched Peter scream and point, and suddenly everyone was rushing around in panic. Even Peter jumped down from the stage, sliding his massive dick back into his trousers, and running at the flames along with the rest of them.

Sam waited as long as she could, moving along the two cars toward Noah, finally breaking into a run at him when she felt Peter and his friends weren't going to look back at her. She ran like she'd never run before, ignoring the nagging pain in her leg from the needle. She pulled the chef's knife from the satchel as she did. She vaulted onto the stage and rounded Noah, jamming the knife into the edge of the wooden stocks, the handle vibrating in the air. She yanked the bolt of the stock towards her and pulled them open. Noah stumbled backwards falling onto his arse, his legs unable

to take his weight. Sam gave a single glance back to the group, as she swung her hand in Noah's direction, hoping he'd take it and start to pull himself up.

They had been seen.

Noah took her hand and pulled himself up suddenly, almost dragging Sam off balance. She stamped her foot down to stay upright, and then Noah was there next to her. The two of them faced off against, maybe, a dozen of them. The two of them on the stage, and Peter and his group stood facing them, as the building behind them burned. The flames had taken a couple of the cars, the ceiling was filling with smoke.

Peter wrung his hands and shook his head. Then he let out a subtle smile. He started to walk to them. The rest of his group walked behind him, acknowledging his leadership perhaps, or just fucking scared of the donkey dicked cunt. They got halfway between the fire and the stage before Peter waved them to a stop. "So what's the plan?" he shouted over the roar and crackle of the fire.

Sam shrugged. "Just winging it."

Peter nodded. The men weren't armed. Sam pulled the chef's knife from the stocks and stood firm. There was nowhere to run. They had to make a final stand.

Peter rolled his shoulders and snapped into a run.

Sam saw immediately that he was a fucking coward. He ran, his fists pumped, but he was achieving nothing more than a jog. He was letting his men, this brethren, his bitches, pass him to get into the fray first. "Good luck," she said to Noah.

"For your parents," he said.

Sam nodded, and pulled the cleaver from the satchel and handed it off to him. Then she turned and threw herself from the stage towards them.

C H A P T E R 1 4

The two of Peter's quickest little bitches were a couple of younger lads. Sixteen, no more. Maybe younger. One of them was wearing a denim fucking tux, and the other a pair of shorts that were too small. Sam could see the angle they were taking. They weren't fighters. They were both running at her, unprepared.

Sam dropped to one knee as they got close, almost shoulder-to-shoulder. She would have said that they were probably brothers, but who wasn't here? She thrust the blade into denim tux's leg, just off the crotch. He screamed and tumbled passed her. She kept a firm grip on the blade and when the other was off balance, surprised by her attack, she slashed at him, belly level. There was contact, and he backed up, holding his large intestines in. She glanced at the one on the floor. He was cradling his leg and pissing blood like it was going out of fashion. She'd hit the femoral artery.

One look to Noah told another story. One of Peter's gang was on the floor, a cleaver impaled through his skull, into his right lobe. One of the others was tangling with Noah, hand-to-hand.

Sam was pushed hard backwards as something hit her across the face. She stumbled back and got her bearings. Another one. He'd punched her across the face. She looked at him, a little startled at first, and then pirouetted around towards Noah, sticking the guy he was tangling with. He rolled to the side, which gave Noah enough time to pull the cleaver from the stiff on the floor and take his own swing, slamming it into his jaw, crushing through the bone, seeing a fountain of blood spurt across all three of them.

"Thanks," he shouted. There was a noise behind him and he spun without thinking, cleaver back up like a samurai. Another went down.

Sam turned back to the one that he punched her. "*Cunt!*" she shouted and ran at him, launching herself into the air and landing on him like he was a gym horse. He went down under her force and as the two of them hit the floor, she let her weight push the knife through his chest plate, heart, pericardium, and left lung. He was dead before she was back to her feet.

She looked over at Noah. He was bleeding from a wound on his temple. There was another, dead at his feet.

Noah looked her and they both looked around to Peter. He was looking around, wary, his army demolished. He was backing towards the wall of flames that now blocked the stairs and the lift. He shook his head, couldn't believe what he was seeing. Couldn't believe he was last man standing. *Last cunt standing*.

Sam looked down at herself. She was a shock of red. Blood from all of them. Noah had fared no better, except the blood on his face was his own.

They started towards Peter. He was choking. The smoke was starting to surround him. As they approached, he held his hands out like he was shepherding velociraptors. "Come on then," he said, goading them. "What are you waiting for?" He coughed more.

Sam span the knife around and reversed her grip. Noah had the cleaver. They surrounded him. Sam motioned in first, but faked to the side, and Peter dodged, Noah swung the cleaver, and Peter managed to knock it from his grip.

And Sam charged. She sliced his arm and butted her shoulder into him, knocking him from his feet. She pounced down onto him, landing one knee onto his chest, knocking the wind and the fight from him for a second. She held the blade to his throat.

"Do it," he wheezed. "Fucking do it, cunt."

"Get him up." She got off him. Noah held the retrieved cleaver to his neck and Sam kept the blade level on him. The smoke was thick now.

"What are you going to do? There's no way out. The longer you spend pricking around with me, the less chance you've got."

Sam smiled. "Come on," she shouted over the roar of the fire, waving him towards the stocks.

C H A P T E R 1 5

Peter stood in the stocks, he made an occasional heave to try and open the thing, but they were made of stronger stuff than him. “You two will pay for this.” The smoke had reached the stage now, the fire burning hard against the walls. Half the cars were on fire. The stairs blocked. The lift door burning.

Sam asked, “You and what army?”

Noah laughed, nervously. “We still gonna get out of here?”

“Hopefully,” Sam said. She pulled the drain cleaner from the satchel. “What about this?”

Noah shook his head, covering his mouth with his arm, the acrid air stinking the basement out. “Nah,” he said. “He’ll never keep his mouth open. Pull his trousers down.”

“What?” Peter blurted. “Fuck off.” He started to buck against the stocks.

Sam shrugged and went around behind him, dropping his trousers and releasing the beast. Noah came around and joined her. He reached into the pocket of his hoodie and pulled out his paring knife. “Like it,” Sam said.

“What?” Peter thrashed from side to side.

Noah started laughing and Sam went back to face Peter. She looked at the instructions on the bottle of drain cleaner. “One squirt or two?”

Peter didn’t know what to do. He kept his mouth shut.

Sam took the cap off the bottle and leaned down to be at his level. “Will you remember my mum when you’re drinking this? Open wide.”

And Noah stabbed him in the dick.

Peter screamed and Sam squirted the liquid down his throat. When it hit the gag reflex he started to choke.

Noah came back around. “I lost the knife. It’s kinda hanging outta his dick and I ain’t getting close enough to retrieve it.”

Peter was spitting up drain cleaner and cursing them out, blood forming in his mouth as the cleaner burned him like acid. He stopped when he saw

his own blood start to pool under the stocks, weeping along the stage.

Sam looked at him closer. “Is he … is he crying?” Then she laughed. “We need to get the fuck out of here.”

Noah nodded in agreement.

They ran across the basement to the shutters that led to freedom. Padlocked closed. Sam ran over to her family’s estate car. The keys were in the ignition. “Get out the way,” she shouted to Noah, waving him over to the side of the shutters. She got in and slammed the car door, turning the key at the same time. She looked in the mirror as the engine turned over, seeing the wall of flames behind her. “Come on, you fuck … piece of shit.”

The engine started.

Sam slammed the car into gear and span the wheels, almost losing control as the back end spun out. Then the car lurched forward and hammered towards the shutters.

The car crashed into them, and the airbags failed as the car slammed to a stop, half in and half out of the basement. She couldn’t see. Everything went black. “What the fuck,” she said feeling around.

Then there was a hand on her. Pulling her from the car. “I’m blind,” she said.

“Blood,” said Noah, dragging her forward. “There’s blood in your eyes. You hit your head.”

She could see shapes and shadows and then brightness. Fresh air. The sound of the raging fire died down as they got further from the building.

They were out, into the car park.

Noah dragged her across the tarmac as she wiped the blood from her eyes, the two of them getting as far as the road opposite Tesco. The fire was burning up the outside of the building. The new cladding holding it in. Creating a funnel.

The skies burned red.

Sam saw that she’d punched a hole through the edge of the shutters, big enough for Noah to drag her through and out. She collapsed to the path and started to weep. Noah crouched down beside her. “The cops will be here soon.”

Sam looked up at the building. The people screaming at the windows. Women. Pregnant women. “This is going to take some explaining,” she said.

The End

U N B O U N D

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

This wasn't the worst thing that had even happened to William. As he sat, his head being held back by the hair, with Tim Tollbridge standing over him, spit hanging from his mouth about to drop into his own, he thought back to last summer.

Last summer one of Tim's gang—his goons, call them what you will at sixteen and still in school—had cut William. Jason Lester was his name. He had cornered him outside of the school in a pathway that led down the side of the local allotments. Jason had pulled a knife and started waving it about. He'd thought it was funny. Even at the time, William didn't think that he had meant to use it. He was being the big man in place of the absent Tim. He was trying to frighten William. He'd said that he wanted to make William shit. He actually used those words. *I want you to shit*.

So William had lunged at him and punched him in the fucking face. His stupid, acne ridden, ugly fucking face. And William had laughed. A red patch grew from Jason's cheek where he punched him, like a fine merlot joining the dots of red on his stupid face. And once he'd started to laugh he couldn't stop. Jason lost his shit, and started to cry. The tears made William laugh harder. It was literally the funniest fucking thing.

That was, until Jason had lunged forward with the knife. Out of anger. He was unable to control his aggression. He punctured William just above the hip bone. It smarted like shit, and although William had lashed out with his fist again, this time not making contact, Jason pulled back, looked at the knife, and with a shocking realization that he had just stuck someone, dropped it and run. He had probably shit himself as well, but at the time, that wasn't William's main concern.

His main concern, understandably, was the blood that was gushing from him at an alarming rate. He applied pressure to the wound as he had seen in a variety of action-type films, but it hadn't seemed to help. Then there was screaming as other kids of varying ages had seen him, also on their way home from school. Then there was blackness.

That was the worst thing that had happened to him until this point. But not as bad as what was going to happen much later today.

Tim was holding back William's head by pulling hard on his hair with one hand and had a firm grip on his jaw with the other, holding it open. Then the gob dribbled from his mouth into William's. He could taste the tobacco on it, and it was weird and slimy.

Tim laughed and let William go, both his jaw and his hair.

William was sitting on one of the toilets in his local pub, *The George*. Sure, he was only seventeen now, but Cherry, the girl who worked behind the bar most lunchtimes gave him a bye. He was pretty sure she knew he was underage, but he was working an apprenticeship around the corner and had cash. He kept to himself most of the time and maybe, just maybe, she was sweet on him. She was older than him, but he'd always liked the look of her—in the few months he'd been coming here—and maybe one day he'd drink enough courage to ask her if she wanted to go out.

Tim turned to him. He had Jason and Del as back up. The two of them were stood behind Tim, by the door, making sure no one interrupted them. As it was lunchtime, the pub was pretty much deserted apart from William, Cherry, and the three of them, after they walked in.

No one was coming to help.

William had decided, as soon as they had followed him into the toilets, that it was best to let them do what they wanted, and get it out of their system. He'd heard on the grapevine that Tim had turned junkie after he left school and instead of moving on with his life and trying to make the best of having a shit school background and little in the way of qualifications, he had kept in with his old mates and they'd taken to doing small time criminal activity, instead of, you know … working.

It had been months since he'd seen them. A few weeks since he'd even thought of them. And then there they were. The three fucking musketeers, standing in the doorway to his local while he was trying to chat up the bar staff.

Look at this, it's wanker.

He recognized the voice without turning to look, and there was a stabbing in his gut where he still had the scar. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Jason was with them. He'd gotten into all sorts of shit over the stabbing, but the wonderful fucking British legal system had called it

assault, not fucking attempted murder, and while he got in shit, he didn't do jail time. Jammy fucker.

"So." Tim smiled at William, sat in the cubicle, the door open. "You testified against my boy." He slapped Jason's chest with the back of his open hand. "He's only just got off community service. What are we going to do about that, grass?"

William shrugged. Hopefully Cherry would think something was amiss —all four of them being in the crapper at the same time for this long—and either come and find out what was what, or call the police. He just had to buy time. "Buy me a drink and respect my honesty?"

Tim stepped forward and slammed his foot down hard onto William's knees. The impact hurt less than the God-damned porcelain cutting into the back of his legs. He was wearing his work shorts. Working on the site—sunny today. "Cunt," William blurted without thinking. He covered his mouth with his hand and looked up at Tim. Tim had a look of surprise that morphed into anger pretty sharpish. He stepped forward and punched William. It knocked his head back, as everything went black. His shoulders cracked against the cistern, and the back of his head caught the wall. He could feel hot liquid on his face. Taste the iron, from the blood. He couldn't see, blinded by the impact, his nose jammed hard with blood. "The fuck?" he said, quietly, trying to keep composure. Trying not to make everything worse. He braced himself, waiting for the worst. He couldn't defend himself, not against all three of them, blinded, and pissing blood.

In the back of his mind he had always suspected that this would happen one day.

"Come on then. Get it over with."

Tim giggled. "You think that we'd do anything here?"

Yes, William thought. *Yes, I do*.

"Fucker."

William held his eyes shut, and waited. He heard the door to the toilets open and close again and then he was in silence. He opened his eyes slowly, blinking away the tears. He still couldn't breathe through his nose. He looked down at himself. Blood covered his white work shirt. *Great*. That was going to need explaining. He rolled his tongue around in his mouth hoping none of his teeth were broken. It didn't feel like it. Touching his

nose, he winched with pain, and jerked back. “Shit.” Sitting for a moment, he wondered what to do next. Get up, he supposed.

He looked at himself in the mirror. He nose was bigger than it used to be, swollen, but not broken, he hoped. Washing the blood off his face made it look better, but not much.

There was a knock at the door.

William flinched, and turned to face the door. *Calm down*, he thought. *They’d hardly be knocking if they were back, now would they?*

The door creaked open a crack. “Will?” It was Cherry.

“Yeah,” he responded, turning back to face the mirror.

The door didn’t move. “You okay?”

“Come in,” he said. There was no point in hiding from her. She was going to see him when he left the toilets, anyway.

Cherry pushed the door open and stood looking at him, her mouth open. “What the … did they … I’m calling the police.” She turned to leave.

“No,” William called her back. “It’ll only make it worse.”

She came back into the toilets and walked up behind him, putting her arms around him while he explained who they were.

After cleaning him up, and a pint on the house, William returned to work to explain why he was late, and why there was fucking blood all over him.

C H A P T E R 2

William had worked the rest of the afternoon shift. Don, his foreman was a good sort, and had said he could go home if he wanted. Let his ma take a look at his face. William hadn't told him that he'd moved out a couple of months back because his ma was shacked up with this violent fucker that was hitting both of them. He declined, politely saying he was paid to work. In actuality he was shaken from meeting up with Jason more than Tim again and just wanted to be around people. Tim was a twat, sure, but Jason stuck him. Man, that still scared him.

Come five, the site closed down for the night and William left with everyone else. They were all heading back to the pub, it being Friday, but much as William would have normally taken the opportunity to sink a few with the rest of the guys, maybe see Cherry, he didn't feel like it tonight. He was going to stop at the Spar on the way home and get a four-pack of some cheap Eastern European lager that was in double figures, and get absolutely trousered.

Leaving site, he turned left, the rest of them turned right, and Don pulled out behind them in his four-by-four, locking the gate before taking off home to his family. He gave William a little wave as he drove past.

It was only a couple of miles home, and less if he took the alleyway that ran down the side of the railway line.

The one his ma had always told him to avoid.

William felt a little strange as he walked. He felt like someone was watching him. That feeling like déjà vu, but not. He crossed the front of the railway station and walked across the car park to the edge of the line. The alley ran from there, a mile up the road, almost to his flat. It was always quiet because it didn't really go anywhere.

William pushed his buds in his ears and took into the alley, blasting metal. He was only a little way in when he started feeling uncomfortable. Looking behind him the alley had curved slightly and he couldn't see the other end of it. On one side the fence that led into the train yard was thick and tall with blackberry bushes. On the other were the backs of old houses, no windows, just bricked up to stop the noise from the trains.

He picked up the pace.

He heard something beneath the music and reached into his pocket to turn off the player. Then something hit him from behind and he barrelled to the ground, turning onto his back as he did. There were the three of them. They were wearing masks, but he knew. *Of course it was them*. They hadn't even bothered to change their clothes since lunchtime.

They were all wearing Halloween clown masks. Scary fucking ones.

William looked at them. This was it. This was the kicking for putting his hands up in court and pointing at Jason. He scrabbled away from them into the bushes, trying to get a purchase to get himself back up onto his feet, but the thorns of the bush cut into him, stinging and drawing blood like a cat scratch. Tim was in the middle of the three of them. He was the one who had dropped William. It felt like he'd punched him in the kidneys. It made breathing hard, but fuck it. It was going to get worse.

Tim crouched down. He didn't speak, he just nodded.

William could see his eyes through the mask. He looked hungry. Thirsty. He looked like he was enjoying the thought of whatever he had decided to do next. Tim stood and held his hand out to William. He didn't see he had a choice, so William reached up and took it, and Tim hefted him back to standing. At the last second, he used William's weight and momentum against him, and as William was pulled back upright, Tim dug his fist into Williams's stomach, dropping him to the floor again.

The other two laughed.

William landed on his arse, rolling onto his side as he tried to get his breath. The two blows had knocked all of the wind out of him, and now his muscles hurt more than after just a day on the site. Tim kicked him. He couldn't defend himself. His boot went into William's stomach. He had his arms cradling there from the last punch, but it didn't stop the force reverberating through him. Then Tim kicked him in the face.

A flash of blackness.

William reached up as the blood gushed from his nose, again. He felt his lip had split, before everything started to feel strange, bloated. His face was swelling up. And other kick sent his head snapping back, another flash of blackness. He couldn't see anything out of his left eye. He couldn't open it.

William choked on his blood as it slipped and slid around in his mouth, down into his gullet, down the back of his throat. Hot. Sticky. Metallic. In quick flashes he saw Tim being congratulated by his friends. Was that it? Was this enough? William could see his hand reaching out towards them. He wasn't moving it. It was an unconscious, involuntary action. Pleading for help. Tim stepped forward and stamped down hard on his hand. He felt the movement, but no pain. No sound. Numb buzzing.

Jason and Del came around Tim, putting their arms somewhere on his body, and lifted William. The numbness subsided and things started to hurt. His hand, his fingers, he couldn't move them properly. Where they were holding him up, his ribs. Busted, maybe. He couldn't breathe properly.

They pushed his face into the bush. He didn't feel the thorns, just the overwhelming feeling of being drowned. Blood in his lungs. Face full of leaves. Mouth swollen.

He felt movement at his waist. Feeling around in his pockets? No. While the two of them held him, Tim was removing his belt. William felt the air go cold on his thighs as his shorts dropped to his ankles.

Panic washed over him, and William tried to get his arms free, pushing and pulling on both sides at once, trying to free himself from the two men's grip. It earned him another hard strike in the kidneys from Tim. His legs went out from under him and he started to drop to the ground, but they held him. Hoisted him back up.

He felt Tim pull his underwear to the side.

No. He tried to cry out. He tried to move, but there was no strength in his fight, and no room to get words from his swollen lips.

Then he felt Tim enter him.

C H A P T E R 3

William pulled his shorts up with one hand, still laying on the concrete. No one had come up the alley since it had happened. He wept. Got to his knees. He looked around the ground. There was blood. His. All of it.

Tim had done what he wanted and the three of them had left.

William got to his feet. He sniffed up blood. The little finger on his left hand was pointing in the wrong direction. He tried to close a fist, and couldn't. He held his shorts up, and started to limp towards his flat. He didn't think. He couldn't.

The numbness from the attack covered his whole body, not just where they'd hit him. Struck him. Touched him. It was everywhere. He continued to the corner of the alley, and looked around. There was no one in the small cul-de-sac that led from the alley to the main road. He didn't want to see anyone. He didn't want anyone to see him.

He limped across the street and up the three steps to the front door of the house. He fumbled in his pockets for the keys. It was only then that he realized that they hadn't taken anything of financial value from him. But *only* financial value. His wallet was still in his side pocket. His keys, now in his hand.

But they'd taken everything else.

He managed to get the keys into the lock and fell through into the communal hallway. He grunted as he landed. His ribs kicking him back. His hand splitting in pain. William rolled his feet into the hall and kicked the door shut, and lay there for a few minutes. He tried to let the safety of the house wash over him, but he couldn't. It didn't. He got to his knees and crawled to the door to his flat, and found the lock with the keys, before flopping into that doorway too. He lay at the bottom of the stairs directly inside the front door for what felt like an eternity. He didn't want to move.

Eventually he found the strength—he didn't know where from—to climb the stairs. He took his clothes off and sat in the shower. The water washed the blood from him. It soothed his body. He sat with the warm water beating down on him for an hour, before he climbed from the shower and threw his clothes in the bin.

He felt his ribs tenderly. They may have been broken, maybe cracked. He pulled his bent fingers together with the other hand. Pain shot up his arm, into his shoulder. His chest. That made him call out which burned his ribs.

William collapsed to the sofa.

C H A P T E R 4

S I X M O N T H S L A T E R

“How did you get here?” Sebastian Noir spoke to Will without looking at him. The ink machine vibrated in his hand and he didn’t let conversation break his concentration.

Will watched the ink going in. Sebastian was recommended by a friend of a friend of a friend. It had taken him far too long to get to this point, so hadn’t wasted much time in the why’s or wherefores as to the reasoning he needed specialized tattoos.

Sebastian was the only person in the country that Will had found willing to ink him with an ink, holy water, goat’s blood mix. “Julie-Ann. A friend of Trish,” Will replied.

“Trish the Goth?” Sebastian lifted the needle. “Wow. You do move in some circles.”

Will nodded. He rested his head back.

“So, I mean, I get asked to ink with some strange shit. People’s relative’s ashes. The blood of their spouses. But this?” He put the machine back down onto Will’s forearm. “And what do these symbols mean?”

“They’re Enochian.”

Sebastian nodded. Will knew that he didn’t know what they meant. Or what Enochian was, probably. That was just as well. He was fed up with everyone telling him what to do. He just wanted this done, and then he could move onto the next stage alone. For now.

“All done.” Sebastian wiped the residue ink away and cleaned Will’s arm. He looked at Will’s other arm. Covered in religious utterances, the tattoo’s on that arm didn’t need to be inked with anything special. Bloke in Birchingate did it for fifty quid. “You into some voodoo, or what?”

Will nodded. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “Something like that. What’s the damage?”

“A hundred as agreed.”

Will pulled his wallet from his leather jacket draped over the back of the chair and counted out six twenties. He tossed them into the chair he’d just left. “Keep the change.” He swung the jacket over his shoulders and slipped his arms in.

“You want to be careful—”

“Gotcha,” Will interrupted, ignoring the warning about infection that was coming. He unlocked the door to the shop and let himself out. The weather bit against him. Cold February weather. It was dark. The door closed behind him, and he heard Sebastian latch it. Will zipped up the jacket and thrust his hands into the pockets. One last stop to Trish, and he could head back home.

—

Trish sat on the floor at Will’s feet. She had put a shock of white hair on the side of her head, perfectly stark against the black, since the last time he had seen her. She was running her fingers over his Enochian letters. “What do they say?” she asked.

“They’re part of a spell,” he answered. He lifted the joint to his lips, and sucked.

“To do what?”

“Magic,” he answered.

She giggled. She’d had too much to drink. Stumbling to her knees she rested both of her hands on his legs. She was wearing a black lace dress thing. Black makeup over the eyes. Will casually stared at her. She was good looking. A bit skinny. But she was a free spirit, and that was attractive. She smiled at him, and Will knew what was coming next. She’d tried it several times over the last month, twice when she’d had too much to drink. “Are you gonna fuck me tonight?” she asked.

Will kept his eyes on hers. He could. She was his type. *Was*. He smiled, as warmly as he could these days. “No, darlin’. You know I’m not into that.” He hadn’t been into that for six months now.

“So what did you come back for?” She pouted and slumped back to the floor.

Will passed her the joint. “Here.” He pulled three hundred quid from his back pocket and handed it to her. “For your help.”

She nodded. “I still don’t know if it’s going to work.”

“It will.” He reached down and booped her nose. She passed back the joint and he took a toke, sitting back. It was time.

C H A P T E R 5

Will sat on the floor of his living room. There was no furniture in the room anymore. No carpet. He sat on the bare floorboards and lit the final candle on the last point of the pentagram. He anointed it with the conjure bag that he'd purchased from a man called *Shack*, in Manchester three weeks ago.

"Belphegor," he said, merely a whisper. "Belphegor, come to me."

In the centre of the pentagram, a circle of dark liquid started to form. Will breathed in sharply. The pool spread, first the size of a saucer, then a tea plate. Soon it was the size of a dinner plate. The viscous red liquid brought a smell of iron with it.

Then a ripple appeared from the centre. The pool continued to gain in size as something started to come through the blood. A small dome at first, it pushed through, the edge of the pool getting larger, until a face came through. A woman, facing the ceiling, being brought through a doorway to another world, another dimension. Will watched with his breath held.

It was working.

The woman rose from the doorway, the blood covering her as if she had just risen from a swimming pool, naked as the day she had been created. She was motionless in herself, with no movement other than the gentle float of her raising, until she stood in the centre of the pentagram, the blood flowing from her body. As it started to reveal her skin beneath, Will could see that she was beautiful. Her skin a translucent pink, completely hairless. Her eyes closed, her lips red with blood. She opened her eyes, drawn to the stare of Will, and smiled. "Why did you call me?" she asked, her voice silky, smooth, yet deep.

"Revenge," he said.

The woman nodded.

"I didn't expect … a woman," Will whispered.

She looked down at herself, her hand coming up to her breast and cupping it. "Hm," she grunted. Her hand dropped to crotch and she slipped her fingers in. "Mm." She removed them, bringing them to her mouth and tasted them. "You get what you are given, I suppose."

Will couldn't stop staring. He had no idea what she meant, but he would find out soon enough. For now, he was happy that he had raised a demon.

She ran her hands over her body, tenderly, feeling her way like she had never felt herself before. Like a child exploring with touch. She slipped her hands around behind her, looking like she was massaging the blood into her body.

Will could feel himself becoming aroused, but he didn't move. He was cross-legged on the floor. There was no way she could see. But she knew. She looked at him and smiled.

"It's been a long time since you felt that way, has it not?" She advanced on him, standing over him, the dribbles of blood still fleeing her body to the floor, and now she dripped onto Will's clothes. She bent down and put her forefinger under his chin and brought her face close to his. So close, he could smell her newness, somehow mixed with an age unbecoming of such beauty. "Do you want me?"

Will nodded slowly, unsure himself, confused at finding his cock hardening for the first time in months.

She smiled and took his hand. She pulled gently for him to get up from the floor, which he did without thinking. She led him through the flat, impossibly, straight to the bedroom. "How do you know …" he words drifted away. He felt stupid asking. He was being led to bed by a hairless, naked demon—one who he was expecting to be a man, or a male, or whatever. He guessed that he got whatever.

She shushed him. "I already know what *you* do," she said. "I know everything."

At the bed, she turned him to face her. Will leaned in to kiss her. They were so close, and she was only a slight smaller than he was. She pulled her head away. "No." She pulled his jeans from his cock and wrapped her hand around it, tugging on it gently. "You've been waiting."

"I couldn't," he replied.

Belphegor dropped to her knees slowly, immediately taking him in her mouth. She jerked his shaft with her hand, her lips around his head. She made approving sounds, while Will looked at the ceiling. His mind was awash with confusion. What was he doing? Here. Fucking a demon?

She stopped and stood, and Will brought his head down to look at her. She wiped the blood around her mouth with the back of hand, and then pushed him gently to the bed. He dropped to sitting, his face level with her breasts. “Suck them,” she said.

Will looked at them. They hung firm, and he wanted to … but the blood.

“Suck them,” she said again, this time firmer.

Will took her left nipple in his mouth and rolled his tongue around it. Perfect, except for the taste of blood. Then she squealed and pushed him back by the shoulders to lay on the bed. A wide, open-mouthed grin slipped across her face, and she straddled him. Sliding herself up his body, across his cock and then down, onto it.

She was wet. Soft, and smooth, but cold as ice on the inside. Will grunted in pleasure. She put her finger over his mouth. “Wait,” she said, sliding up him and down again. He raised his hips to meet her thrust, but she pulled back, and when he dropped back to the bed, relaxing, she started to rocking against him again. She squeezed his cock with her cunt, like an icy fist.

Will was close.

As he started to ejaculate, she left him, let him shoot semen across his belly. “Hrrr,” he grunted, an unsatisfactory orgasm slipping away too fast.

“Not this time,” She said, getting up from the bed and turning back to the door. “I’m hungry.”

“Belphegor,” Will said quietly, spent.

“Call me Belle,” she said, leaving the room.

Will lay there. He was breathing shallow, but hard. He couldn’t explain it. He looked down at his belly, down to his jeans hooked on his knees as they folded over the end of the bed. He sat up and reached down beside the bed, picking up a shirt and wiping the goo from his skin before it started to dry. He pulled the tee his was wearing down to cover it, and stood, his cock drooping. He dragged his jeans up and followed Belphegor—Belle—out. She was in the kitchen, the fridge door open in her hand, as she bent down and examined the contents. “Not much in, I’ve … been too busy to shop.” He looked at her naked arse. “Sorry,” he added.

She reached in and pulled an open pack of sausages from the shelf. She sniffed at them.

At first, Will thought it was to make sure they were still good. Did that matter to a demon? Who knew? "I can cook those for you," he said, turning to the cooker and twisting the knob on the gas.

Belle took one of the pork sausages (high meat content, too. Will was always particular about the quantity of meat in things that were made largely of intestines, testicles, and hoof), and raised it in a toast. "Chin-chin," she said, and bit into it.

Will recoiled at the sight, before realizing how silly he must look. He just performed a basic black magic ritual and raised a demon lord. Fucked it, too. And he was worried about a sausage.

"Nice tats," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

He looked at his arm. The Enochian letters. "Yeah," he said.

"I do," she replied.

Will raised his eyebrows in question.

"I do know why they're there. So," she said, slipping the rest of the raw pork sausage into her mouth and chewing. "Are we going to do this, or what? I'm going to need clothes." She looked down at herself. "I haven't been to earth in a while, but I'm guessing a naked chick walking down the street might raise a few suspicions."

Will nodded, looking at her skin. "Of course," he said, shyly looking away.

"No need to be shy. We can fuck again when you're ready. I owe you. Would you like me to call you Master?"

The idea was appealing, but, "No," he said quickly.

Belle dropped her head to the side, shrugging. "Suit yourself. Will it is." She pointed out of the kitchen towards the bedroom. "I'll help myself then?"

Will nodded and she went to the bedroom. He could hear her rummaging.

C H A P T E R 6

The most distracting thing, at least Will thought, was her lack of eyebrows.

Belle sat opposite him. They were outside the back of *The Anchor* pub in Northgate. It was a few miles from where Will lived, and they had taken the bus. Belle had raised a couple of looks from the oldies on the bus when they got on, but between the two of them, they were too scared, he expected, to stare for long. Belle had found a tee shirt that didn't have any sleeves, and was torn by design from the armpit to the seam at the waist. She didn't wear anything underneath it, revealing her breasts freely from most angles. She had taken a pair of jeans with the knees torn out, and hoisted them up with a studded belt. She didn't take a jacket saying she didn't feel the cold. Will was wearing the same clothes as last night, when they'd fucked, and it wasn't until they were trapped on the bus that he realized he stank of BO and cum. Between that and his ink, and that he had barely dragged a comb through his hair, it was no surprise that none of this people wanted to acknowledge them. He sipped his beer.

"So which one of them is supposed to be here?" Belle asked.

"I thought you could read my mind?" Will countered, genuinely interested.

"I can, but I don't. I found that knowing what everyone is thinking all the time and having their entire breadth of knowledge at my fingertips makes me a dull conversationalist."

"Huh. Anyway." He took another sip. "Del. He plays in the band." Will pointed to the posters that lined the fence looking out onto the dual carriageway.

"Dig Bicks," she said, reading the name of the band, slowly. "Nice. Clever."

Will got the sarcasm. "He never was subtle."

"So how do want to do this?" Belle watched the people as they passed. Now they were in the grounds of a pub in the early evening, her lack of hair and their general dress was raising less attention. She had a pint in front of her, but only at Will's insistence. He thought it would be weird if she didn't have the presence of a drink. Belle had asked the woman behind the bar if

they had any raw meat, before Will intervened and laughed it off saying that was a Swedish cocktail. She'd gotten a pint of John Smith's in the end and was touching the glass occasionally, but hadn't picked it up. *I'll get you some sausages later,* he had assured her.

"I don't know." He replied. "What do you think? I thought you'd want to see what the guy looks like first."

She looked around. "Nah," she said. "Let's get it done tonight."

Will was slightly taken aback. "Okay."

"I could eviscerate him on the stage in front of the crowd?" she mused.

"Er, no. That would be bad. I think it best if we keep it on the down low."

"Subtlety," she said. "Nice. Okay. How about I use my feminine charms to lure him somewhere private and then we get down to business?"

Will nodded. "That sounds better."

Belle stood to the side of the pubs tiny and ineffectual mosh pit. She had no interest in touching, or being touched, by the people that enjoyed this sort of music. Del was playing the bass in the band. He was slapping the guitar, and looked like he knew what he was doing, but Belle knew better. It was good showmanship, but the playing was substandard. The rest of the band bopped along, playing a number of mid-to-late nineties metal covers. Still, the crowd seemed to like it.

Belle just watched Del.

Del had noticed her. Of course he had noticed her. She watched him when he arrived, and she invaded his mind without his knowledge. She'd tenderly raped him. And now she stood there, long blonde hair. Eyebrows. The things that Del found attractive. The switch was easy. A cubicle. In as herself, out as Del's dream woman. Her shape was still the same, her facial features, but he liked blondes.

He'd winked at her.

And from there, she knew she had him.

As the set finished, Belle had prepared to talk to him, but then there were three damned encores. And the crowd loved it. Fucking substandard Megadeath. Murdering classics.

Finally, it finished.

Del seemed out of breath when she approached. Hopefully he wasn't one of those pretend musicians who just wanted to go home to bed alone after the gig. She walked straight up to him, gently pushing passed a couple of groupie whores, and almost fell into his arms. She rested her hand on his chest. "You were the best," she said.

Del laughed. She could feel him trying to decide which of the women in front of him was to his taste. The two whores were together. He could have them both, but he hadn't worked that out yet. He was slow. Neanderthal. And a little confused. She could feel him picturing himself with each of them. He was a filthy misogynist. Thinking about them like meat.

Meat.

Belle was hungry.

She leaned to his ear, whispering under the noise of the pub. "I'll let you do anything you want."

Del looked at her. *Anything?* he mouthed.

She nodded. Sealed.

C H A P T E R 7

"Del and Belle." He giggled. Del had his arm over Belle's shoulder as the two of them walked from the gig towards the flat that Del had assured her was his alone. He'd even left his bass behind for the drummer to take, so he didn't need to wait. The promise of *anything* seemed to get him excited enough that not only did he leave there and then, but he didn't give the other two whores a look.

And Will walked behind them. Half a street back.

In the shadows.

They reached the front door of a block. It looked like shitty student accommodation. Del could see the look on her face, and said, "It's not as bad on the inside. Promise." He was naively sweet in his own rapist way. Belle turned to him and kissed him. It was gentle. It played into the way he was being so tender with her. She didn't want to scare him off. He responded, kissing her back, before opening the door and letting her go in first. She glanced over his shoulder as she ran her fingers gently under his chin, seeing Will waiting as agreed, far enough away to not arouse suspicion.

Not that Del was short on arousal at the moment.

She went into the hallway and leaned against the wall. It gave him a good look at her body. "Which way?" she asked. It was the basement. She already knew.

"Follow me," he said, brushing passed her *by accident*. He smiled awkwardly, and led her to the stairs at the back of the building and down one flight to a solitary door. He fumbled getting the key into lock.

He was all front. Inside the recesses of his mind Belphegor had slid around looking into all of the crevasses. She'd seen his wonts and desires. She'd seen his truth. Del wasn't the ladies man that he made out to be. He usually packed the shit up after the gig while Micky, the lead singer, got all the tail. Fuck, even the drummer got more action than this cunt. That's why he was so nervous. He rarely got this far. Not that women like Belle were what he really liked.

Not deep down.

He held the door open and Belle slipped by into the flat. It was dark. The hallway was narrow. Pokey. She waited for him to turn the light on, and then turned back to him, putting her hand behind his neck and drawing him in close to her face. “What do you want to do first?” she asked.

“Drink?”

Even Belphegor was surprised at the answer. Bless. He *was* nervous. “Why not?” She followed him through to the kitchen, where she waited for him to pour two drinks. He kept whiskey in the fridge. Weird. Even a demon could tell a lot about a man from his kitchen. The glance into the fridge showed only beer, fine, whiskey, still weird, and ready meals. The microwave was dirty. The worktops had food detritus over them. He didn’t look after himself and he had no pride. She shrugged and took the cold whiskey from him, touching the glass to her lips, watching him over the rim of the glass. She took a sip, and asked him, “So what do you do for a living? Just the music?”

“Yeah, man.” He relaxed into his drink. “I live for the music. You know, when I was growing up my old man used to hit me. I didn’t do well in school. Fell in with a crowd. Don’t do anything like that anymore.”

Right.

“Music saved me. It gave me an outlet.” He looked at the floor. “I don’t know what I’d do without it.”

Belphegor probed. It was a line. He was trying to get an emotional reaction from Belle. He was trying to manipulate her into bed. *This guy must have the IQ of a sprig of parsley*. She put her glass on the counter top —the whiskey was a shitty blend anyway—and walked over to him, putting her hand in the centre of his chest. “Poor you,” she said. “What can I do to make it better?”

Del smiled at her, also resting his glass down. “Shall we go to the bedroom?” he asked, quietly.

Smooth.

She took his hand. “Lead the way.”

Del drew her forward to the living area and through the far door into the bedroom. It was musty. Damp, even. There was black mold in one corner of the room, stark against the white walls. The mattress was on the

floorboards, with no actual bed underneath, and there was a football team flag pinned, or possibly nailed, to the wall directly above the bed head.

Very tasteful.

"So what do you want? I said anything."

"Sit," he said, walking her to the bed and releasing her.

Belle tried to sit seductively, difficult when almost on the floor. "What?" she asked in a low voice.

Del waved for her to hush. He was still nervous. He went over to the wardrobe. Dark solid wood, out of place in such a minimalist room. He reached in and then stopped. He glanced back at her. "Anything?"

Belle nodded.

He pulled out a suit bag—a black garment carrier, zipped up, with a hanger out the top—and held it out to her without speaking. Belle took it. She played her part, looking at the bag with some sort of child-like wonder.

"It's never been worn," he blurted.

Belle nodded, and unzipped the carrier, looking inside. She nodded, and stood. "No problem," she said. "But how will I know you're not peaking, when I put it on?"

Del looked terrified rather than excited. She could see he was already hard in his jeans. "Wait," she said. "I know." She placed the carrier down with reverence, and took Del's hand. She led him gently to the mattress, and on to it, the two of them standing in the centre. She pushed him against the wall, covered by the flag and leaned against him. She took his wrists and raised them, hard against the wall, bringing them up to a crucifixion pose. She licked his lips and he muttered something biblical.

She straddled across him, against the wall, holding herself impossibly, like gravity was pulling her to the wall and not the floor.

Del felt it, he looked down at her. "Fucking hell," he said. "How the fuck are you doing that? Are you some sort of contortionist?"

"Something like that," Belle said. She leaned back, riding him cowgirl style against the wall, letting go of his left hand. He looked around wildly trying to work out how she was holding herself against the wall two feet from the mattress. She reached over to the corner of the flag and wrapped her fingers around the nail holding it up. What kind of cunt puts a flag up

with four-inch nails? She laughed to herself. She pulled it out and the flag flopping down over his arm. He still looked confused. Poor boy. She raised the nail up and brought it down in a stabbing motion going through the palm of this right hand and impaling him to the wall.

Del screamed. “The fucking …” And then he started to buck like a fucking bronco machine, stood against the wall, with a demon riding him.

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeee-*haw*,” Belle screamed. She reached over and pulled the second nail from the flag with one hand and taking Del’s flailing hand with the other. She gripped it, and he couldn’t shake her. He looked around wildly trying to grasp what was happening. She was bending the laws of physics, and was strong as an ox. She pushed his left hand against the wall and impaled that one too.

Del made a succession of grunts and wails followed by the word cunt, several times. Belle got down from the wall and stood on the bed. She was close enough for him to reach her with his feet and he kicked her, but it was like kicking a concrete wall. She didn’t move, or flinch, her femininity gone as she looked at him.

“What do you want?” he cried.

Belle smiled. She reached down and picked up a pair of stinking fucking boxers from the floor and stuffed them in Del’s mouth as he fought to get free. Then she picked up the clothes carrier and left the bedroom closing the door.

Belle went to the sofa and dropped the carrier down, unzipping it and removing the contents. She smiled to herself. *Little man*. She pulled her tee over her head and her jeans off. Then she dressed in the little sailor outfit in the carrier. It was tight across her tits, and on her arse, but it worked well enough. She went to the door of the flat and out, up the stairs, and to the street. She went out and waved over Will.

As soon as he saw her, he broke into a run, across the street, grabbing her by the elbow and almost dragging her back into the house. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he said, slamming the front door. “You can’t come outside dressed like that.”

Belle raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“People,” he replied.

She shook her head. “You know I’m not this luscious creature, right? All delicate and feminine?”

Will shook his head. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “You’re right. Where is he?”

“In the bedroom, waiting for me to come back.”

Will looked down at her clothes. “Yeah,” he said. “About that. What the fuck …?” He let the question hang.

“Come on.” She led him back down the stairs and into the flat. She took him to the living room and faced the door of the bedroom. “You’re sure you want to do this?”

Will nodded, slowly. He was. He thought he was. “I’m leaving this in your hands,” he said. “I want to watch him suffer.”

“Suffer,” she echoed. Next to the sofa, there was a dining chair. Weirdly, no dining table, just the chair. She picked it up, and took it with her into the bedroom. Will followed.

Belle placed the chair at the end of the bed opposite Del, still hanging from the wall. He’d stopped trying to free himself, the fight was gone. He watched her when she came in. His eyes drifted up and down her body clothed in the sailor suit. She faced him, asking, “Is this a slutty sailor suit, or is it supposed to be for a little boy?”

He shook his head.

Belle dropped her head to her shoulder in pity. “Oh, but you don’t know. I can see everything inside that black, demented little head of yours. You are *so* confused in there.”

Will came in, and Del’s thrashing begun again. He pulled at the nails that held him up, blood letting from them, streaking down his hands to his wrists and dropping off, to the mattress at his feet.

Belle gestured for Will to sit in the chair, and he did as was expected of him. He faced Del while he took his time in recognizing him. The tats, the change in his hair. His mannerisms were all so different from six months ago. Del shook his head. Belle walked over to him and pulled the boxers from his mouth. He hungrily sucked the air in. “Will, man. What the fuck?

What are you doing here?" He looked at Belle. "You've got help me. Get me down."

Will shook his head. "I don't think so." He smiled. "Belle here is … with me." She walked over to Will's side and he ran his hand over her half covered arse.

"What do you want?" Del blurted.

"What do you think?" Will's smile grew.

"Nah. I didn't do nothing to you. I never stuck you." He looked around. Having Will suddenly there seemed to clear his head, make him forget about the pain. He was looking for a way out. "I didn't do nothing later, either. I can help you. I know where Tim is. You'll never find him without me."

Will nodded. "Bargaining. What do you think?" He looked at Belle.

She shook her head. "I think we can find him without this one's help." She went over to Del and stood in front of him. She undid his belt, and popped the button on his jeans, pulling the two sides apart, lowering the zip. She crouched as she pulled his jeans down, and then did the same with his boxers.

He pulled on the nails, giving out a yell. Belle picked up his dirty boxers again and forced them into his mouth. She looked him up and down, crucified. She then returned to Will at the end of the bed and sat in his lap. She gyrated, sliding her arse over his cock, confined in his jeans. Will grunted. He couldn't see Del with Belle where she was, but he knew he was there, watching. He wasn't sure about Belle fucking him with an audience, though. She stood up and lifted the skirt of the suit, bending forward. Will couldn't help himself. He started to lap at her arsehole, rimming her with his tongue. She moaned out in pleasure. She rose a little, tearing the top of the costume over her head, still facing Del.

"Oh, God," she groaned. "Fucking yes." She brought her hand under the front of the skirt and started to finger fuck herself. "I'm gonna cum," she said. She looked up at Del. He was hard, trapped somewhere between pleasure and pain, his face contorted by the nails in his hands holding him up, but panting through the shorts in his mouth, aching to be touched. Belle stepped away from Will, and slid the skirt off. She stood there naked in front of the two men. She gave Will a quick look and winked at him, before

turning her attention to Del. She crouched down in front of him and took his cock in her mouth. She felt him flex with pleasure, and then she bit down. Hard. Her teeth breaking the soft skin on the shaft, blood pouring from him, pushed by the pressure of his erection. It squirted over her face, into her mouth, down her chin, over her naked body. She laughed and fell back on the mattress, giggling, running her fingers through the blood, rubbing it into her tits, sliding her hands down, over her belly, to her slit, around, and in. Del didn't lose his hard-on at first, even with blood gushing from him. He was thrashing his head from side to side, as the blood pattered on the dirty sheets. As she laughed, he became flaccid.

Belle got to her knees and crawled naked to Will, taking his cock from his pants and sucking on it hungrily. He grunted in pleasure, his eyes not leaving Del. He watched him squirm as she pleasured him.

Belle stopped. She looked Will in the eyes. "Better," she said, pleased that he had lasted longer this time, and hadn't cum. "Hold on." She got up and padded from the room, leaving bloody footprints on the floorboards as she did. When she returned a couple of minutes later, Del's head was hung low, his skin pale. Blood pooled on the mattress, the caseless pillows saturated. He was still moving. She smiled at Will, who had his cock in his hand, stroking. "Good," she said. She had one of the knives from the kitchen in her hand. She went over to Del and raised his head with her hand. "Still with me?" she asked, before letting his head drop again. She turned her attention to Will, sitting there wanking. "It's a bit blunt." She turned back to Del and grabbed what was left of his mangled penis, taking the shaft and his balls in one hand and starting to slice the lot off with the knife. It brought Del back around and he started to thrash again, only this time he was weak. Barely trying. "It's more hacking than slicing," she said with brevity over Del's grunts of pain.

She got through the penis and it dropped from her grip, slopping onto the mattress. "Oops." She giggled, and finished hacking at his scrotum. Then she let that drop from her hand too, along with the knife. Del was unconscious, blood coming from his shattered groin, flesh and muscle, tendons, and veins hanging loose.

She turned back to Will, and crouched down in front of him again, taking his cock from his hand and into her mouth, pleasuring him until he finished, as he stared dead-eyed at Del's draining corpse.

Belle wiped the remnants of the spunk from her lips as she smiled staring at Will. He looked from the corpse to her and back again, letting out a short snort. “I’m hungry,” she said.

Will winked at her. “You’re going to have to give me a few minutes to recharge.”

She slapped his legs. “Cheeky.” She stood up and turned back to Del. “No, I’m really hungry.”

“Ah.”

She stepped onto the mattress, but stopped herself, before turning back to him. “You don’t have to watch if you don’t want to.”

Will shrugged, but didn’t move.

Belle licked her lips. She turned back to Del and dropped carefully to her knees. She picked his flaccid cock from the blood splattered mattress and sniffed at it.

“Ugh.” Will stood. “I’ll be, uh …” He gestured to the living room and followed the direction of his own motion.

Belle glanced back at him. “I won’t be long.”

He left the room.

Belle turned her attention back to Del’s cock. She sniffed it again and tossed it to one side. It didn’t smell … fresh. She clambered through the blood and testicles to stop, kneeling at Del’s feet like she was worshipping him—or about to give him head. He would have liked the sentiment. She picked the knife back up from the mattress and stabbed it into his belly, just above his matted pubic hair, pulling it jaggedly across one side of his gut and then the other. She dropped the knife between his limp legs and reached into the stomach wound, rummaging around. She found a long, firm, tube and yanked it out. The large intestine. “Mm,” she purred. “Sausage.” She fed on the intestines from the body, and once she had enough to sate her, she picked the knife back up and hacked through the firm flesh of it. Lumps of undigested food slopped from the end, watery fluids hung viscous from the wound, and the smell of fresh shit rose from the now loose tube. “Oh,” she said, waving her hand in front of her nose. “Dear Lordy.” She looked up at Del’s face. “You probably weren’t well, anyway.” She smiled and gnawed on the intestine in her hand, tearing the flesh from it with her teeth.

“Yummy.”

C H A P T E R 8

Belle sat with her feet dangling off the side of Will's bed. "'S next?" she asked. She was twiddling with her hair.

"Jason," he said. "I want Tim last." He shot her a glance as he pulled his shorts back up. "When are you going to get rid of that?" He nodded at her hair.

She spread her legs and slapped the hair between her legs. "Aw. You no likey?" She giggled. "Spoil sport." She pouted.

Will flashed her a quick smile. "You know me."

Belle shuffled off the bed. "Bacon it is." She stood and left.

Will watched her go. His life was getting stranger and stranger. Not only had he started to behave more like a normal human being again—for the first time in months—since her arrival less than a week ago, but she'd fallen into the role of his girlfriend with some ease. He stood and pulled a shirt over his head without unbuttoning it. And the things they were doing … he shrugged it from his thoughts. There was no sense in dwelling on that. She was what she was. Maybe after they had finished doing this then she would stay? Who knew?

Will followed the smell of bacon out into the hallway and to the kitchen. Belle stood naked in front of the frying pan. "You wanna watch yourself," he said. "You'll get burned."

"Already have been," she said. She poured the bacon from the pan onto a plate and turned to Will passing it to him. "So what's the plan?"

Will had noticed that she had no interest in either food, nor drink. He also noticed that the hair between her legs was gone.

She saw him looking and giggled, turning away.

Will picked up a piece of the fried meat and chewed on it, thinking. "We should be able to pick up Jason somewhere around here. I've spoken to some people who have seen him around."

Belle nodded. "Suffering?"

"Very much so."

“Do you want to watch again?”

Will nodded, his face flushing red.

“Tonight.”

“That soon?”

Belle smiled. “No time like the present, right?” She slipped passed him ensuring that she pushed her body against his. Will lifted the plate over her head as she left, before stuffing another piece of bacon into his mouth.

—

“Here.”

The two of them stood outside The George. “You’re sure,” said Belle. She rested her hand on his arm. “You haven’t been here since that day.”

Will looked at her. It still bothered him that she sometimes knew things that she shouldn’t. She’d said that she didn’t mean to, but when he had intense thoughts about something they bled out into her mind. She could hear them, without listening. It was a beautiful way for her to say that she could feel his lingering pain. At least, *he* thought so. “I know,” he said, quietly. “It’s fine.” A lie. He knew it. He knew that she knew it. He wasn’t looking forward to this

“Who’s Cherry?” Belle asked.

Damn. “No one,” he lied again.

Belle frowned, but took Will’s arm regardless and the two of them went in the pub. It was evening, and the place was busier than he remembered. He always remembered it as empty, Cherry behind the bar. It was how he wanted to remember it. The two of them stood by the door, while Belle waited for Will to become comfortable enough to enter properly. It was busy enough that he couldn’t see behind the bar. People in the way. He couldn’t see the faces of everyone in the place. There was probably more in the poolroom around the back. He led Belle to the edge of the bar where there was a single empty stool. He slapped it, letting Belle take the seat. She smiled at him like a girlfriend would, slipping up onto the stool and sliding around to face the bar, her man on her shoulder. Will took a twenty out his wallet and held it, resting his hand on the bar top, note up.

A young man came over quickly. “What’ll it be?” He looked at Belle with some unconscious desire. Tonight she had cropped hair on one side of her head, long on the other. Eyebrows. There was a tattoo of a dragon crawling around her neck, disappearing into the collar of her torn tee. Will was used to people looking at her like that. She seemed to exude some sort of pheromone that effected just about everyone. He had never asked her about it, but he knew it was there. Even when she looked … different … people still seemed to want her.

“Pint of Snakebite and Black,” Belle answered, looking into his eyes. He probably thought she was flirting. She wasn’t. She was looking into his soul, his heart.

He snapped out of it, remembering that he worked there, his eyes flicking to Will, and his eyebrows raising.

“Same,” Will replied to the unspoken question.

The barman went off to prep the drinks and the two of them stayed in silence. Belle was staring at the bottles behind the bar, but Will thought she was probably scanning the room with her mind, for her own edification. He was also looking around. He was trying to see if he knew anyone in here. There were a couple of guys from the site in the corner. He’d lost his appenticeship soon after Tim had … Will brushed away the memory under a rug in his head. The two of them hadn’t seen him and he certainly didn’t want to open a conversation with them. There was an empty table near the door to the poolroom. He tapped Belle on the shoulder and nodded for her to go over and sit. He’d bring the drinks over.

As the two of them sat there, they both watched people come and go. Belle knew exactly who she was looking for, even though she had never seen him before. Will had just returned with another two beers. He’d drunk the first two. “Nothing.” He slurred a little when he spoke.

Belle looked at him, but didn’t speak.

“What’s the point?” He started to neck the next pint.

“Watch that shit,” she said. “It’ll have you off your feet.”

Will looked at her over the glass as he tipped it. His eyebrows spoke for his lips.

Belle shook her head. As she watched, the door to the pub opened. Two people came in. A man and a woman. She nudged Will and nodded to the two of them as they crossed to the bar, oblivious to their presence.

Will looked up, and he watched Jason as he walked, holding hands with some girl.

"Fucker," he said. Will stood up, taking one of the empty glasses. "Another?" he asked, heading straight to the bar without waiting for an answer. Belle watched him. He was going to do something stupid.

Will walked straight to the bar and pushed his way in between Jason and whatever poor schmuck was sitting on the next stool. He picked up schmuck's beer glass, which was still full, and swung it without word into the face of the girl that was with Jason, just behind his shoulder. Had the glass not shattered, it would have only broken her nose. But it did.

Beer went everywhere.

The glass broke in Will's hand cutting into the flesh made soft by not working on the site for so many months. He dropped what was left of the glass, shards sticking out of him, to the floor. The girl screamed, and the commotion started.

Belle was watching from the table, and simply said, "Fuck."

Jason looked at Will, there was a second of blankness, no recollection, no memory of the violence. The shanking. The rape. Then Will saw the cogs turn far enough that he recognized him through the haircut and the tats, a slow, Neanderthal recognition, something that suddenly seemed to make Jason scared. Scared shitless. Then he realized what had happened and he screamed, "*Trish*."

Will grinned at him, and then shouldered his whole weight onto Jason, pushing him from the barstool to the floor of the pub. Will straddled him like Belle would do to him when she was fucking him. Jason had the wind knocked out of him, and although a number of people seemed to suddenly be moving about and screaming, no one was actually *doing anything*. At least, not to Will. He raised his right hand, the one without the broken glass sticking out of it, and jabbed it into Jason's face. His head rocked back hard onto the tile floor of the pub, making a pocking sound as it bounced off the floor. Will's first punch split his lip, and the blood let hard and fast, onto

Jason's chin, up his nose, and onto Will's knuckles. Then he punched him again. He caught his cheek. Jason's head bounced off the floor again. This time his face started to swell around one eye, turning green, the eyelid closing down. Jason's other eye lolled around in the socket, unable to focus on what was going on. Jason raised his hand for a third punch, but someone locked their arm around his and started to pull him away. "No, you cunts," he shouted, trying to get back to his target. "Fuck him." They pulled Will away, and across the floor of the pub. Two of them. One holding each arm. "You rapist fuckers," he shouted at them, no longer in the moment, but caught somewhere in the past.

"Fucking, Jesus Christ." Belle stood up and clicked her fingers.

The man holding Will's good arm back, suddenly released him, bringing both his hands to his head, cradling his ears. He looked like he was being deafened by something no one else could hear.

Will took the opportunity to swing his now free hand and strike whoever had a hold of his other arm. The guy let go, falling away. Will ran forward and knocked the barman who was leaning over Jason to the side. He stomped Jason's face, breaking his nose open, blood slooped onto the floor, and Jason screamed blue fucking murder.

Will laughed.

Belle appeared at his side. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Will stomped on him again. This time his head jerked to the side and lay motionless. He stopped and looked around the pub. No one was moving. They were all motionless in whatever they were doing. He looked at someone who was standing on the sidelines, watching, their cider spilling over the side of the glass, hung in midair. He stopped, panting. "What the fuck?"

"This wasn't the plan," she said. "You're drunk."

He turned on her. "What are you, my mum? Did you stop time? I didn't know you could do that."

Belle raised her hand again, fingers together ready to click. "Do you want me to restart all this? Without me, you'll have no more revenge."

Will hesitated. He looked around at the people. Most of them seemed to be gunning for him. He looked at Jason, bloodied on the floor and pointed at him. "That's not enough. I want him to suffer."

Belle stepped up next him. “And what about her?”

Trish was laying on her back, her eyes puffed out and swollen, her nose crook. There were shards of glass sticking out of her eyelids, piercing through into her eyes. Blood coming from her mouth.

Will shrugged.

“That’s all you’ve got?” Belle asked.

“I thought you were supposed to be the demon here. Where are your balls?”

Belle sighed. “Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she said, shaking her head. “Yes, Master.”

Sarcasm.

C H A P T E R 9

"So." Will let the word hang in the air. They were back at his flat. Standing in the kitchen. He was staring at Belle, his eyebrows raised, waiting for an explanation. First they were in the pub. Now they were here. "What's this fucking game?"

Belle raised her hand to hush him. "I didn't sign up for this."

"You're a fucking demon. I raised you to help me feel …" *What? Better about himself?* "… something."

"And I thought this would be fun." She shrugged. "I brought you back here to stop you from doing something stupid. Something else … stupid."

"And about that. When were you going to tell me that you could flit about the earth like a shadow?"

"You never asked."

"We took the bus to Ashbury, to get Del," he said, exasperated.

Belle smiled at him. "Getting to know you?"

Will turned away. "You're fucking useless."

Belle sighed. *Oh, the drama*. "Okay," she said. "I'll be straight up with you. I don't know what books you've been reading, or what TV shows you think have given you some deep insight as to what power you think you have over me, or what you think I'm doing here, but I'm here because I chose to be here, bucko." She grabbed his shoulder and turned him around, manhandling him with the fortitude of a wrestler. "I'm not here to do your bidding. I chose to come. And you want to know why?" Will looked away and she slapped him like his mum. He looked back. "Those three—those three fuckers who wrecked you. The one's who broke you. Took the innocence from you. Them? I had them. They were all coming to Hell regardless. But you—you were all sweetness and light. So I thought I could nudge you along the way too."

"You want my soul?"

"I've got your soul now. What did you think after we cut some dude's cock and balls off, and fucked over it? Saint Peter's gonna strike it off,

because Delly-Welly was mean to me? *We cut his cock off and he bled to death*."

Will let his head hang down. "You used me."

"Jesus on a stick," she said. "So fucking what?"

Will barged passed her out of the room and Belle followed him. He went into the bedroom and slumped on the bed, his head in his hands. She stood at the door and waited for him to do whatever. Lose his shit, probably.

"And there's nothing I can do about it?"

"Almost certainly, but I'm hardly going to tell you what, now, am I?"

He looked at her, tears in his eyes. "I guess."

"So, now we've got that out of the way, how about we finish what we started? Would that make you feel better? I mean, I'm under no obligation, of course. But, heck, I'm here. May as well have some more fun."

Will nodded, slowly. "When will you take my soul?" he asked, quietly.

"When you die, whenever that is. Same as everyone else. Blow job?"

C H A P T E R 1 0

Belle stood at Will's side as they watched Jason from a distance. "Grab and go?" he offered her a crisp.

"Seems a bit simple." Belle stuck her hand in the bag and pulled out a handful of bits from the bottom. "Worcester Sauce flavoured crisps are weird."

"They are." Will tipped the bag into his mouth, taking the last of them. He had decided not to worry about the whole soul thing for now. As Belle has said, *what was he going to do about it?* "Where *is* he going?"

Belle pointed out to the beach huts under the lip of the cliff. "What about those?"

Will shook his head. "Doesn't seem much like a beach hut kind of guy, does he?"

Belle shook her head. The two of them had followed Jason as he left his mum's house, heading towards the beach. Will had forbidden them from doing anything at the house. He didn't think it was fair on his mum. Bless. Jason had hooked around the hospital grounds on the way, and Will thought he was going to see Trish—blinded permanently by the *incident*—but he had gone on by. Probably didn't want to fuck her now she was a cripple. And now he was down on the beach and wandering across the wet sand, cutting the corner off the prom.

The cold weather precluded there being a lot of people on the beach. It was empty.

The two of them stuck to the prom as Del walked over the sand, he was heading for the spit that led to the next bay, only accessible while the tide was out.

Will and Belle reached the end of the prom, blocked by fallen cliff face, and waited there, sharing a second bag of crisps—full English breakfast flavour—while he ambled along slowly.

"These taste like farts," said Belle.

"It's the egg."

He disappeared around the rock formation and out of sight.

"Where the fuck is he going?"

"Let's find out." Belle jumped down from the prom and started to hurry across the sand, followed by Will. They only had a few minutes before the tide was going to start to come back in.

At the spit, they watched. Jason followed the cliffs back toward the beach carefully, before disappearing into the rocks.

"He's gone in a fucking cave," Will said.

"Interestinger and interestinger," Belle replied.

They waited. Only a couple of minutes later, Jason reappeared, leaving in the same direction he came, heading straight back towards them. Will turned and hurried around the corner out of sight, with Belle shortly behind him. "Wait," he said. He regarded the beach. There was no one. Apart from the wind, there wasn't even sound. "Here," he said.

"What? I thought you liked it messy."

"Let's just get rid of Jason and then we can deal with Tim. I want Tim to suffer unimaginably."

"You're the boss."

Will and Belle went over the rock pools close to the cliff and climbed a few feet up. It was enough to ensure that when Jason came around the corner, assuming he was going to go the same way that he came, he wouldn't immediately see them and bolt. He didn't disappoint. He came around the corner and walked straight across the sand away from the cliff. Will jumped down, unheard behind him, and ran over to him pushing him from his feet.

Jason fell onto the soft sand and rolled onto his back. "What the fu—"

He immediately recognized Will and started to push himself away on his back, trying to create distance. His nose was still mashed in from the pub fight and dark purple bruising covered the left of his face.

"Hush, little man." Will smiled at him. "First off," he called above the noise of the surf, getting closer, "what *are* you doing out here?"

Jason plunged his hands into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a bag. "For Tim, that's all." He tossed the bag to Will's feet. "Keep it."

Belle had joined him and she bent down and picked the bag up. "Heroin," she said.

Will shot a glance with a raised eyebrow.

"I can tell by looking." She grinned. "It's fun finding things out instead of just looking into people's minds and knowing them, isn't it?"

Will stepped towards Jason. "And where might we find Tim?"

Jason shook his head. "No fucking way. He'll kill me."

"Aaaaannnddd, we won't?"

Jason looked around wildly.

"Seriously. Where is Tim?"

Jason looked longingly at the prom, the cliffs in the distance. "You can find him at Carter's, the old youth club. He's kipping in the basement. Got chucked out of his missus place for hitting her, and his old man won't take him back because of that shit." He waved at Belle. "I've been volunteering there for a while. I let him sleep down there."

"Very Samaratinus of you."

"Samaratinus?" Belle whispered.

Will shrugged. "Keys," he gestured for Jason to throw them.

Jason rummaged around in his jeans pocket and pulled a small bunch of keys out, chucking them over to Will. He looked at Belle. "You were there, I remember you."

Belle nodded, pocketing the Heroin baggie. "Yep." She leaned into Will's shoulder. "What do you want?"

"Fuck him," Will replied, loudly enough that Jason could hear.

"Will do." She took a stride towards Jason, before quickly turning back to Will. "See what I did?" She held her mouth gaping open. "*Will* do? Hah!" She turned away and advanced on Jason.

If Jason had been more aware of who Belle was and made more of an effort to get away, he probably had time to get to his feet and run. It wouldn't have made a difference, but it would have given him something in hindsight to think about. Not that there was much time left for him to *hindsight*.

Belle reached down, with Jason still on his elbows, laying on the sand, the water just creeping around him now, and grabbed him by the jeans. She picked him up like he was the weight of a watermelon, and twirled him

around to his knees, resting him on all fours, like a baby. She tore his jeans off, ripping them open. He screamed as the denim ripped and pulled at his skin. She pulled his pants down. He'd already shit himself. "You really are a baby," she said. She pulled her fist back like she was in a boxing ring, and slammed it into his arsehole.

Jason let out a wail that cut off quickly.

"I'm in the bowel," she said. "Warm." Belle moved her hand deeper into him, wearing him like a puppet, and Jason wailed again. "Colon." Then Jason started screaming. She turned and looked at Will. "I'm waving at you." She laughed, and pulled her hand out roughly. It was covered in blood mixed with shit from the tips of her fingers to near the elbow. "Now I know what a vet feels like." Jason's arse gaped open and blood pumped from it like the tap had been opened on a caravan's sewage pipe. He cried out in pain, facing the sand, unable to move. She wrinkled her nose and smiled at Will.

Will nodded. "Very inventive, but do shut him up."

She saluted with her blood hand, leaving a small imprint on her forehead. She turned and pushed his face down into the sand, below the level of the pooling water. He flapped his arms briefly, before slumping forward. She lay him out flat as the water lapped against him, washing her hand and arm in the water. "Wanna fuck?" she asked Will as she straightened.

He looked around. "Maybe later," he said.

C H A P T E R 1 1

Carter's Youth Club was in the shit end of the shit part of the town. There was an Aldi opposite it. Everyone in the surrounding area was unemployed. There was a nice curry shop. Only legend told of what the building was before it was a youth club. It was a youth club when Will was little. His mum had taken him to a judo class there when he was about eight and had nearly gotten his nose broken.

These days it was a refuge for troubled teens. At least, that was what it claimed to be. Sure, at some point in the past it was run by good people trying to make a difference, but these days it was run by 'Jasons', letting their mates stay there for free, probably having parties in the unused spaces. Fucking.

"What is it?" Belle asked as the two of them stood in Aldi's car park staring at the building.

"Like you don't know." He dismissed her comment and crossed the street to the building. It was still early. The place wouldn't open for the kids until lunchtime. Places like this needed to be open all the time. Not just when they felt like it. Will went to the front door and started trying keys.

"What if it's alarmed?" Belle asked.

"Nah. Not with Tim in here." She nodded, as Will found the right key and the door popped open. "Et, voila."

"Great."

Will looked at her. "Once this is over, what happens to you?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "Whatever I feel like."

"Hm." Will opened the door quietly and stepped in. "No alarm," he said. The two of them entered and he closed the door behind them, locking it.

Echoing around the building, they could hear a clunk … clunk. Metal. Heavy.

Will pointed across the entrance hall and over to the hallway that led deeper into the building. He hadn't been in here since he was eight. He was just following the sound.

Clunk.

Will stopped at the corner, waving Belle to wait behind him. She came up next to him slapping his hand down like a naughty schoolboy. "*Behave*," she scolded. She looked around the corner with him. It was an open floor, wide like a school assembly hall. None of the standard gym equipment though. There was a desk to the left with paperwork on it. Leaflets, signing in sheets and such, sat in a mess. Over the other side of the room was a semi-circle of sofa's, empty. A TV in the corner. It looked like a doss-hole. And the whole place smelt a little of sweat. But that could be Tim.

Clunk.

Belle walked around Will and the corner and across the room towards the door on the far side. It was where the sound was coming from. She opened the door a crack and looked through. From behind her, Will could see it was shadowed in darkness. "Stairs," she whispered, pulling the door open. They led downwards.

Will nodded her forward. If she wanted to be in the lead, then so be it. Belle started down in silence. She could move with the grace and speed of a deer when she wanted to. Will wasn't so lucky. He seemed to find every creaking floorboard as he went down behind her, and for every one, she shot him a disapproving look. At the bottom of the stairs was a fire door. The noise came again, muffled from behind the door. Belle rested her hand on the door and pushed it open a little. The light came from behind. She opened the door far enough to get her head around it, and then pushed it properly open, finding the room beyond empty.

Will followed her in. A locker room. There was a camp bed in the corner. A sheet strewn across it. It must have been where Tim had been sleeping. The room was walled with lockers and two long benches rode the centre of the room. The clunk came again, from beyond the double doors on the other side of the room. Belle went over and looked carefully through the window in the door. She waved Will over with a grin.

He joined her and looked through. A gym.

"Interesting," she whispered. "Looks like we can have fun in there."

Tim was in the middle of the room, equipment set up all around him. He was lifting weights on a bench, laying down, pushing the bar straight up and down above his chest. It didn't look like he had that much weight on it.

Will didn't know much about gyms, but he was fairly sure that you weren't supposed to lift on your own.

It was very dangerous.

He raised a smile. "Shall we?" The two of them pushed the doors open together, and walked in, purposefully across the room to Tim, not giving him a chance to prepare himself for anything. By the time he'd managed to spurt "What the fuck," and put the weights back on the bell rest, the two of them were over him.

He went to sit up and Belle pushed her hand down on his chest, her immense strength holding him in place. He looked up Belle first examining her, trying to work out what she wanted, if he knew her, perhaps? Then he looked at Will, doing the same. He was looking at them upside down, so it took a few minutes of them staring at each other in silence, until the penny seemed to drop for Tim.

"Fucking William," he said. "Long time no see." He grinned at Will. Shit eating fucker. "What can I do for you, and this, ravishing may I say, young lady."

Will squinted at him.

"Strong, isn't she?" Tim teased.

"Get him up," Will said.

Belle looked at Will, "Up?"

"Not like that."

She giggled, and pulled Tim to his feet. He was shirtless. Sweating. He was wearing a pair of exercise shorts and a pair of running shoes. Nothing else. Will looked at him as Tim regarded him up and down, almost daring him to do whatever he was going to do.

"Now what, big boy?" he asked.

Will could see his eyes flicking around the room. He was looking for a way out. Looking for a weapon, perhaps. "I think we should shut you up, first."

Belle walked him over to the chest press machine and forced him to sit, while Will picked up a couple of skipping ropes. They tied his wrists to the handles of the machine, leaving him sitting there looking at them. He tried to move his arms, test the weight of the machine. He could bring his arms

together a little, but then he was spent, dropping the weight's back down. "It's because I've been lifting," he said.

Belle raised one side of her mouth. "Like we give a shit." She turned to Will who was walking the room. "Something about shutting him up?"

"Yes." Will hefted a dumbbell. He felt the weight of it. He held it in his hand as he jabbed at the air.

"Jokes over," Tim said quietly. He was scared.

"Joke was over a long time ago," Will replied, walking back over to him, carrying the bell. He raised it up and slugged it into his mouth. Normally a stupid place to plant a punch—full of teeth. The cast iron bell snapped his neck back into the cushion of the high backed seat of the machine. Tim grunted at first, bringing his head back upright before staring blearily at Will. He opened his mouth, full of blood, leaving it to drain down his chin and onto his chest. Bits of broken tooth crept along in the river of blood, with Tim trying to spit it out, spittle mixed with blood clinging onto his lips like cheese pulling from a pizza. He said something, but Will couldn't quite make it out. Cunt, perhaps?

"Now that," Belle pointed at Tim's mashed lower face, "is a turn on. What do you think lover?"

"Later," Will replied. There was an anger growing inside him, much like the one in the pub, but this time he wanted to control it, not the other way around. He dropped the dumbbell and looked around the room for something else. He was aware that Tim was pulling against the ropes, but he didn't care. Belle would make sure he stayed there.

Will went out across the gym floor and stuck his head through one of the other doors. "Shower," he said to no one. Across to the next. He went in. A small kitchen. Sink. Fridge. Not much. He opened the drawers. Basic cutlery. Butter knives, that sort of thing. What could be expected in a place like this though, with the sort of people you might get down here? He picked up the tin opener and prodded it into the middle of his palm. Blunt. He tossed it back in the drawer. Opened the fridge and crouched. Milk bottles. He took one, smelt the milk—off—and set it on the draining board. The only other thing in the fridge was some bananas. "Right." He stood back up and took the bottle back into the gym where Tim was sitting, blood still weeping from his mouth, but now his lips were badly swollen. He put

the bottle on the bench across from Tim and continued over to the last door. It was locked. He cupped his hands together and looked through the window that was veined with wires. “Ah,” he said. He pulled Jason’s set of keys from his pockets and started trying them one at a time in the lock. He could hear Tim thrashing. Panic.

He found the right key and opened the door. It was a caretakers closet, with a set of metal shelves. Will took the toolbox from the second shelf and carried it across to the bench where the milk bottle was. He knocked the bottle off with the toolbox, the rancid milk glooped onto the floor like yogurt.

“Fucking hell,” Belle said, holding her nose.

Will squinted at her. “You’re a demon. Grow up.”

Tim looked at Belle and Will couldn’t make up his mind if he was confused or terrified.

Will opened the tools and took them from the box, laying them out next to the box for Tim to see. Hammer. Nice. Screwdriver set. Useful. Pliers. Hm. He held the pliers, clicking them open and shut a few times. Tim kicked out.

Will took the pliers over to the chest press machine and clicked the pliers in front of Tim’s face, before clasping them onto the overgrown, dirty nail of his left thumb. Then he pulled. The nail snapped before he’d gotten it from the skin, splitting and digging into Tim’s flesh. Tim wailed out in pain, trying to withdraw his hand, but unable to. Will laughed. He moved to the forefinger next and tried again. This one came away from the nailbed with ease, only splitting the skin by the knuckle as it pulled away from the quick. Tim screamed again, with Will nodding along like it was the beat of a metal song. Then he took the next, another, and the last, from the pinky. With each nail, there was the initial struggle, then the pop of the release, in time with the scream of Tim. After each came away, Will dropped it to the floor.

Then he picked up the hammer.

Will’s left hand was bloody, but largely undamaged. Will held it by the wrist and brought the hammer up over his head, bringing it down hard onto Tim’s fingers. Tim wailed more and Will looked at Belle. “Too much?” he asked.

“You do you.” She shrugged. She looked bored, leaning against an exercise bike.

So he brought it up again and down. The centre of the back of Tim’s hand this time. The bone gave, splintering under the skin, poking shards through the surface. Will huffed as the excitement, the adrenaline, grabbed him and shook him. He had waited for so long.

He looked at Tim, screaming, but he couldn’t hear it. He wasn’t in the same place. He was somewhere else. Enjoying the moment. He dropped the hammer into Tim’s lap and went and got a screwdriver. It was a foot long. He pressed it into the soft area of the shoulder just below the ball joint. It didn’t slip in as easy as he had expected, so he took his other hand and pushed his palm against the screwdrivers handle and drove it harder. Once the shaft of it was in, it became easier, sliding up to the handle, passing through Tim and out the other side. He thrashed, but his head started to loll. Will pulled the screwdriver out and slapped him.

“Too much pain,” Belle said. “He’s slipping out of consciousness.”

“Fucker,” Will screamed into his face. “You stay awake for me.”

The scream seemed to bring Tim back. At least to a state of semi-consciousness. Will untied his hands and took his feet, pulling him from the machine onto the floor, flat. Tim flopped about trying to fight back, to get up, but he flooped like a drowning fish. Will dropped down, straddling him across the chest. “You keep your eyes open.” Will raised the hammer over his head, Tim watching him.

He slammed the hammer into the top of his head, popping it like a watermelon. The hammer stayed there, wedged in, Tim staring glazed at Will. He was still breathing, methodically, but his fight was gone. It was like his mind had left his body behind and gone shopping. Will wriggled the hammer back and forth to release it and Tim twitched a little. Once out, Will raised it up and hit Tim again. His brains, punctured and mashed dribbled from the top of his head like custard. Thick, and yellow. Brain fluid slid across the floor, pooling with blood. Will let go of the hammer.

Belle walked over, standing in Tim’s brain matter, her feet either side of his head, leaving Will’s head level with her hips. “Better?” she asked.

Will huffed, nodding, trying to get air into his lungs. He felt a little light headed.

Belle crouched, queening over Tim's lifeless messed up head.

Will could see up her skirt. She wasn't wearing any knickers. "Wanna fuck?" she asked.

He nodded, and she stood, taking his shoulders and guiding him to the floor. He lay in Tim's pooling blood and she unbuttoned his fly, opened his jeans and roughly pulled them from him. She lifted her tee over her head revealing her naked body beneath. Belle pulled the short skirt up over her hips and sat down on Will's cock as it flexed, aching for her. She rode him slowly at first, as he lay there watching her rock back and forth. She let her hands wander, rolling over Tim's corpse. She slid her fingers into his head, bringing them out covering in brain and transparent fluid, mixed with blood and shards of skull. She squished the bits between her fingers, dropping them onto Will's chest and she rode harder. She cupped her breast with her bloody hand, squeezing his cock with her cunt. She started grunting, triggering something in Will. He bucked, cumming hard inside her.

As his back relaxed, and his arch lowered, she slipped from him. "So it is done," she said.

Will lay on the floor, spent. He wiped the bits of Tim from his chest and flicked them across the floor. "Yeah."

Belle got to her feet, pulling her skirt down. She picked up her tee. "Kebab?" she asked.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Belle sat on the edge of the bed. The sun had just peeked in through the bedroom window and Will was still asleep, his torso half out from under the covers, his feet sticking out the end. “So,” she wiggled his toes. “Do you want some breakfast?”

Will wrenched himself up onto an elbow. “Hm?”

“Sleep well?”

“Hm.”

“Morning person, much.” She smiled and stood, pulling the shirt he was wearing last night on over her naked body.

“What’s happening today?” Will slung his feet out from the bed and to the carpet. He needed to vacuum. “I need some coffee.”

“What do you mean, *what’s happening today?*” She padded barefoot from the room.

Will stretched his arms above his head and rubbed his balled fists into his eye sockets. They’d fucked several times last night in celebration of the completion of the job. He felt like a weight was lifted. Not as high as he had hoped that it would have been, but it was gone from across his shoulders. He stood and poked around in the pile of laundry, pulling a pair of shorts from it. He held them up. At least they were blood less. There was a stain just to the side of the fly by that was probably ice-cream. Probably. He sniffed them, and satisfied he pulled them on, following her to the kitchen and the sound of the kettle rumbling.

Will slumped down on one of the chairs at the small table in the corner of the kitchen and waited for Belle to make the coffee, which she did in silence. She slid his mug in front of him and slipped into the chair opposite. He sipped the warm liquid and glanced at her, a small frown on his face.

“What?” she asked.

“I was just wondering what your plans are for today.”

They fell into an uncomfortable silence, while Belle just stared at him. She finally responded. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

"No." Will hurriedly shook his head. "No, not at all. I … love having you here. I just thought …" his voice trailed off.

"Thought I would, what, piss off back to wherever I came from? Is that it?"

Will shrugged. "I wouldn't have put it so bluntly but yes. I assumed that once I had achieved my goal—and having found out that you had some underhanded *other* reason to be here which has already been satisfied—that you would *piss off back to wherever you came from*."

Belle smiled. "But I kinda like it here."

"Hm," Will grunted. He focused back on his coffee. He didn't want to piss her off. But equally he wasn't looking at having a forever after companion. Even if the sex was good.

"Amazing," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

"What?"

"The sex is amazing. At least from your point of view." She tapped her temple and smiled. "Don't forget I know what's going on up there, you know."

"Get out of my *head*." Will slammed the coffee mug down on the table too hard and some gushed over the side, spilling onto the shit plastic table. "And what do you mean, *from my point of view?*"

Belle smiled petulantly at him. "I've had better."

The weight from Will's shoulders returned and his muscled knotted. "Well if that's what you think, you can fuck right off."

"Right," she replied. She picked his coffee mug from the table and walked over to the sink, pouring it in.

"What the f—" He stopped himself. He probably deserved that. "Sorry," he mumbled. "You can stay I suppose, I just—"

"No," she interrupted him. "No. Quite. I should go. Go about my infernal business. It's me, it's not you. I thought we had something. I *thought* you wanted me to hang around."

"Well you do apparently have possession of my eternal soul now. We will be together forever, I assume."

"You assume incorrectly. Once you get down there it won't all be weird-ass fucking, and brain lube, you know. Yes, I said it. What you asked me to do last night was weird. Anyway. I'll be off then."

"Where?" Will asked. Suddenly the realization that he was going to be alone for the first time in a few weeks struck him. He didn't want to be alone. Then he thought of Cherry. Maybe she was still single? *Maybe she was single before? You never asked*. He should see what she was up to. Ask her out. Yes. That was a great idea. He was more practiced in bed now. He was more … together than he was before.

Belle snapped her fingers under his nose. "You drifted off there, snowflake."

"Hm?" He looked her in the eyes. "Yeah. So, you're off."

She planted her hands on the table and pushed herself to standing. "I am."

He looked her down. "You might want to put on some knickers. Or trousers. Something?"

She snorted at him and clicked her fingers again.

Then she was gone.

Will stared at the space where she just was. He'd never witnessed something just vaporize before. It was … cool. Anyway. She'd disappeared back to wherever, and he wasn't about to worry about his immortal soul for now. He felt good. Great, in fact.

This was shaping up to be the best decision of his life.

C H A P T E R 1 3

Will stood in front of the mirror on the wardrobe door. It was cracked but it would do. He was trying to straighten his cuffs. The shirt was brand new. It still had the creases in it from the packet and they didn't sit right on his arms. He should have just sucked it up and ironed one he already had, but *fuck that noise*. He just wanted to look his best, and cover the majority of his ink. She'd see the letters, the words, and ask questions. He also wanted to look presentable. After what had happened in the George last week he wasn't even sure if he should go.

But he hadn't had any repercussions from the police.

Which in retrospect, was weird. Will stared at himself in the mirror. Had nobody grassed him up? That seemed unlikely. Improbable. Even James hadn't said anything? Trish? He buttoned the shirt up to the collar and pulled a brown leather over the top. He'd found it in the bottom of the wardrobe, and it was less … challenging … than the black one. More proper.

It was nearly lunchtime and if he was going to do this, now was the time.

Will took a deep breath. The closer he had gotten to The George, the queasier he had felt about it. What if he went in and someone in there just pointed at him, like Donald Sutherland at the end of that film? What if Cherry was there behind the bar and she saw him and screamed? What if the police were waiting in there?

Will shook his head. *Calm the fuck down*.

None of that was going to happen. He was going to walk in. The pub was going to be empty. It was barely twelve. Cherry was going to be behind the bar. She was going to see him and smile. She was going to say *Hello stranger. Long time no see*. And drop her knickers. Well, maybe not *everything* was going to happen just like that. Wishful thinking.

Will smiled. It was going to be fine.

He crossed the street and took one last breath, with his hand on the brass door handle, before pushing it open.

The pub was unchanged. The mess from the other night cleared up, but aside from that, it was the same desolate place from all those months ago. It was somehow different in the daytime, when it was quiet. Cherry was at the bar, pouring a pint. Will glanced at the young guy on one of the stools at the end of the bar—the only other person in there. He had his head down but was watching Cherry. She looked up, a glance, at Will, then poured her attention back on the pint.

She hadn't recognised him. Fair enough. But she would. He walked over to the bar and sat a few feet down from her and waited for her to finish. Cherry finished pouring the pint and carried it to the guy down the far end. They exchanged a few words that Will couldn't hear, and then she turned and came up the bar to Will.

"What'll it be?" she asked.

She looked incredible. Six months without having eyes on her had made her glow. Will smiled. He tried to remember how he would have looked then, only six months ago, but he'd changed so much. Will opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out, instead his lips drifted to a smile. And then she clicked.

"William?"

"Hi," he said, unsure if she was going to kick off over what had happened the other night.

"What happened to you? Where have you been?"

Will internally breathed a sigh of relief. "Around," he said. "Off working. Getting stuff done."

"Here," she took down a bottle of whiskey. The good stuff. And poured a thick shot into a glass. "On the house."

She slid the glass over the bar in front of him and reached down and touched the top of his wrist where some Enochian was poking out of his shirt. "Got some tattoos too?"

Her touch raced electricity up his arm. He wanted to blurt out his intentions, there and then. *Stay calm*. "Yes." The word came out softly. More so than he'd wanted. He cleared his throat.

She smiled, warmly, and let his wrist go. “I’ll be back,” she said. She walked down to the other guy at the end of the bar and again, exchanged words with him. They seemed quiet, whispered, but that was probably just Will’s imagination. He rolled the whiskey around in the glass. Not his usual tipple. But she returned soon enough and stood with him again. “Did you hear about the trouble in here the other night?”

Will raised his eyebrows and shook his head, silent.

“Some thugs fighting. Weirdest thing, too. Danny was on shift, said he told the police all about it. Someone bottled some poor girl in the face and beat someone else half to death. Anyway. Danny said he couldn’t remember what the bloke looked like. He told me he was like some dream person.”

Will frowned. “Yeah, weird.” *Belle*, he thought. She must have done something to keep him safe. Or maybe just to keep herself safe? That didn’t make any sense. She could be anything she wanted to be when she was here, and had gone now. If she came back again, she’d probably look like someone else entirely. “Any idea who it was?”

“None. That’s the thing. Nobody seemed to remember what the guy looked like. I mean, that’s fucking creepy.”

Will nodded. He felt a little bad for the way he’d finished things with Belle, now. She was clearly looking after him. “Look,” Will said, knocking back the whiskey. “I was just wondering if you wanted to hook up one night?”

“Aren’t you the charmer?” Cherry looked a little taken aback. “Hook up?”

Will hadn’t meant for it to come out like that. “I’m sorry, I mean—”

“Now if you’d asked me six months ago …” she let her voice drift away. “However, you have been beaten to the finish line. I’ve already got a date.” She looked over her shoulder to the other guy. “For tonight, actually.”

Will looked down the bar at him. Both Will and Cherry staring at him must have given him the willies or something because the guy looked up at them. He raised his glass in a toast at the two of them and smiled. “Chin-chin.” He put the glass down without taking a sip.

Will stared at him for a moment and then he looked to Cherry. “Who is he?” he asked, his throat tightening as he spoke.

"Name's Bill," she answered. "It's his first time in here today, and won't you look at that. He's already asked me out."

"Bill," Will repeated. *Fucking Bill*. He stared at the guy. *Belle*, he thought. *The fuck*. He tore his attention from *Bill* who hadn't taken his eyes from Will since he had said *chin-fucking-chin*, and looked at Cherry. "Come on, Cherry. How about it? I'll take you somewhere nice."

"Bill said he'd take me somewhere nice."

Will chewed the inside of his cheek. "Don't be so stubborn," he said too loudly.

"Huh," Cherry responded and turned away, storming down the bar and disappearing out the back.

Will shook his head. "For fuck's sake," he whispered. He placed his glass on the bar and rolled it around in his fingers, before letting it go and walking slowly down to the guy sitting on the stool. He slipped up onto the one next to him, looking at him in mirror set into the wall behind the bar. "Bill, huh?"

"Will." Bill nodded.

"Couldn't come up with a better name?"

"Nope."

Bill was a beautiful man, even Will could tell in the mirror. He looked *curated*. Sculpted. He had a jaw, deftly secreted behind a shallow stubble, and piercing blue eyes. His hair was *insta* modelled, his clothes fashionable, but not foppish. "What the fuck are you doing?" Will asked.

Bill smiled, raising his glass into the mirror. "I wanted to know who you dumped me for."

Will let his whole body slump slightly. "But why? I thought you'd be off demoning around someone else by now."

"Nope."

"So what *is* your plan? You've seen. Are you going to fuck off now or what?"

"Nope." Bill slid around on his stool. "Thought I'd stick around and see what else I could pick up while I'm here."

Cherry returned to the bar from the back and shot a dirty look at Will, now that he'd moved. Bill watched her and smiled.

"No," Will said, dropping his voice to a whisper, well aware that she could hear their conversation now. "You leave her the fuck alone."

"You and what army are going to stop me? I'll get to know her, find out what her demons are, fix them, get a couple of souls along the way, fuck her …" Bill's voice dropped to a whisper so quiet, that Will could barely hear him.

Will sighed. "What do you want?"

"Hm?"

"What do you want to go away?"

"Oh, I don't know. You could have had me until I was bored, and then I would have gone of my own volition. Perhaps this situation wouldn't have occurred." He looked at Will. "Perhaps."

"You want me? Is that it? Come on then. Come home with me now, and I'll forget all about Cherry."

Bill put his hand on Will's knee. "I didn't know you were like that."

Will flicked his hand away. "You know what I mean."

"It doesn't bother you that I am a man currently. If I were Belle you would take me back and fuck me and do all those things to me again, knowing that I am whatever I want to be?"

"I guess I've always known."

Bill looked around the bar. Still empty apart from the three of them. "No cigar." He slid his stool back, scraping it across the floor. "I'll see you at eight, then?" he called over to Cherry.

She looked up and smiled at him. "Eight," she agreed.

Bill tipped his head at Will and smiled, turned and left without further word.

Will looked at Cherry. He knew that there was no point in arguing with her further. Even if she wasn't that keen on *Bill* she was going to dig her heels in just to prove a point. Besides, Bill was stunningly handsome. Will screwed up his face. "Oh for fuck's sake," he said with enough volume for Cherry to hear. He also got up, following Bill out into the street.

He was unsurprised to find Bill gone.

C H A P T E R 1 4

Will stood in the small square park opposite The George. He was wearing a hoodie under his black leather, jeans, and DMs. He had a crowbar in his backpack. His plan—what there was of it—was to rile Belle, or Bill, or Belphegor, or what-the-fuck-ever, into doing something demon-y in front of Cherry. Proving that she shouldn't go out with him. Her mortal soul was at stake.

Even in his head it sounded ridiculous.

He looked at the time. It was nearly eight. It made sense that they would be meeting here. While he hadn't heard them making plans, even Cherry wasn't stupid enough to give out her address, surely.

But what if she had?

Will shook his head. *Don't be stupid. Just wait.*

A couple of minutes past and then Cherry came out of the pub. *Good.* She was dressed sexy. She was obviously planning on a nice night. Hell, who wouldn't with Bill McCooljaw? She was wearing a vintage looking get up that was all the rage these days. She was clutching her handbag in front of her. Will wanted her. He wanted her now. He had to resist leaving the safety of the park after dark to rush over to her, tell her how he felt. *Just wait.*

Thirty seconds to eight and Bill walks around the corner. He was wearing a suit. Slim one. Made him look like he needed to eat some pies. And a bit fucking hipstery. He walked up to her. Fucking hell. They made a good couple. Surely this had to be on purpose?

The two of them embraced quickly, like friends. Polite. Then Bill took Cherry's arm and started to lead her away, across the front of the pub and away from the town centre. Will could hear her giggling in the hush of the evening.

He followed at a distance he deemed to be safe. He had no idea how close he could get to Bill without him knowing he was there. But he hadn't turned. He was just talking to Cherry. He was seducing her.

Will realized how fucking immature he was. All Belle had to do to seduce *him* was turn up naked with beer. It made him hate himself. It made the feelings that he had after the incident all those months ago rise back up in him, a deviant sickness in his gut, the feeling that it was all his fault.

Just like this.

All his fault.

And as much as he hated himself, he hated Bill more. Not for what he had done to him. But for what he was about to do to her. She didn't deserve it. *She wasn't damaged goods*.

Will slipped the backpack from around his shoulder and pulled the crowbar out of it, before slipping it back on over both shoulders. He felt the heft of the iron bar. It was big enough to do some serious damage to that pretty-boy face of his.

Will used his other hand to pull the hood out from the back of his jacket, and slid it over his head. He wasn't expecting it to provide much in the way of a disguise, but it was better than nothing, he supposed.

Not that he was expecting to make it out of this unscathed anyway. Make the fucker demon out on him, and prove a point. It was probably going to hurt, but it might score him some sweet, sweet, sympathy points with Cherry, once she realized what this butthole was really like.

He continued on behind them as they went further from the town. *Where are they going?* Will carried the iron concealed up his sleeve, as they left the main road and started to cross the park. It didn't matter where they were going, this was the perfect place.

It was dark and empty.

Will waited for them to get a reasonable distance into the park. Cherry was sure to scream. *Sure to*. And Will didn't need any have-a-go-heroes jumping in on the act until it was done.

He followed them, sliding the backpack from his back and letting it drop to the grass silently. He slipped the iron from his sleeve and carried it in his left hand, giving it a couple of swings to make sure he was ready for the hit. Just hard enough to make him show his true self.

The two of them were only feet ahead of him.

Here goes.

Will waited until they seemed to be bumping shoulders. They looked off balance. He took the chance, and charged Bill, shoving him to the ground. He toppled to the grass, and rolled onto his back.

"What the fuck," Cherry pushed Will by the shoulder. It wasn't hard. It was the sort of shove you'd give a mate on the playground if he was being a cheeky cunt.

Will shoved her back. He didn't mean to push her so hard, but she stumbled backwards onto her arse. He turned his attention to Bill. He was still sitting in the grass, having made no attempt to get back up. He was grinning like a Cheshire fucking cat. Will aimed the iron at him like a blade. "Show her," he shouted. "*Show her.*"

Bill just stared at him.

"Show me what? What the fuck are you talking about?"

Will glanced at Cherry. She was just starting to get to her feet, fighting with the dress. "He's not human," he said, the iron still pointing into Bill face. "He was a she last week."

"What are you taking?" she said.

Will turned his attention back to Bill. Still grinning. Will raised the iron. "Watch," he said.

"*No!*" Cherry screamed.

Will brought the iron down hard on Bill's temple opening him up like a ripe tomato. His face split open, the front of the skull parting from the temple, the skin splitting, and the brain being exposed. Fluid sprayed across Will, and Bill? Bill just sat there. He didn't speak and he didn't move, his smile plastered on his face like a wax work. "Say something, you cunt." Will brought the iron back down, cleaving a gash into Bill's broken face. His eye caving in, black fluid spewing down his face. His head jarred to the left and his body flopped onto its side, brain and bone slopping lazily onto the grass. "Do something." Will brought it up and down for a third time, this time caving the top of his head in.

Then there was pain. A warm tingling that started on his hip, radiating outwards until an explosion erupted in his side. Will looked down. He couldn't see anything. What had Bill done? Then he saw Cherry. She was standing there behind him. She had something in her hand.

It glinted in the moonlight.

A blade.

She'd fucking stabbed him.

She was crying. "Stop it," she wailed. Then she thrust forward with the blade again, straight into Will's gut.

Fuck.

He recoiled backwards, slipping off the blade and to the grass. Letting go of the iron, he rested his hand on his stomach. It hurt, and was weirdly numb at the same time. The warmth of his blood slopping over his skin felt good against the sudden coldness of his fingers. *I'm bleeding out*, he thought. He looked to the side, to Bill still laying in the grass, his face a mash of bone fragments and fluids, clear, black, and red. His one good eye staring at him. That smile on his face still.

Will found everything starting to go black. He was sure his eyes weren't closing. It was just getting darker. As he stared, Bill winked at him through the bloody mess of his skull. As least, Will thought he had.

Maybe it was just a trick of his own mind as the blood that should have been in his brain was keeping his hands warm.

Maybe that was it.

The End

A G A I N S T T Y P E

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

The guy on the Youtube video slid the knife over the skin and found the joint with ease. “Apply a little pressure,” he said, and then pushed the small blade through to the board. He was using one of those stupid little knives and made it look really easy.

Like, *really* easy.

Jon’s knife was bigger. He was no chef, so he couldn’t tell you what sort of knife it was even if he had wanted to, but it wasn’t as big as a cleaver, but it *was* the biggest knife in the block when he bought it. He knew at the time he should have gone to a knife shop. They’re probably not called knife shops are they? Chef shops, he guessed. Then he would know what sort of knife he had.

The knife block came from a budget supermarket down the road that is always full of chavs and one where Jon had bought a packet of fresh, washed salad that had a massive fucking bug in it. He stopped shopping there after that. These days he goes to the next town along. They’ve got a Waitrose. He always feels somewhat fancy in there. Besides, these days he won’t buy non-food items from the supermarket. He’s realised that they’re all a bit crap. Amazon. Buy things from Amazon. Quality.

Jon slid the knife up the skin to the joint and felt with the blade. He thought he had found the ball joint, or whatever the fuck it was called, under the skin. It sort of looked like the one on the video, and he applied a little pressure. It didn’t give. He knew the blade was pretty dull, but he did expect some more movement.

So he pushed harder.

He put his hand on top of the flat of the blade. He’d seen that in videos before. Then he pushed. Still nothing. He took the joint firmly in one hand and start sawing with the knife. He knew that wasn’t what you were supposed to do. And then he could feel the anger rising in him again.

He twisted the knife as he sawed. It was just hacking now. There was no style nor substance to the way he was trying to break this thing down, becoming more frustrated as the seconds went by. “For fuck’s sake,” he blurted.

The twat on the video had finished and there was a pile of chicken pieces laying in a nice little presentation pile at the front of his chopping board, and he'd said something about how easy it was. Mother fucker. Jon looked at the joint that he'd hacked at. The skin was torn. The flesh looked like it had been jammed into a mincer, and how Jon knew what that looked like was a secret that to this day he had not shared with anyone. And he hadn't even reached the bone yet.

Twat stabbed his knife into the chopping block and the camera zoomed in on it as the titles ran. That couldn't be good for the blade, Jon thought. He looked at the corpse laying across his workbench, the arm at the elbow hacked up. "Cunt," he shouted, pushing the whole body off the back of the bench and onto the floor. Into the sawdust.

Tribbles, Jon's cat, scampered over and started to sniff at it. He won't eat it. He'll bore with it after he realises that no matter what films tell you, human flesh isn't like chicken at all. Tribbles likes chicken flavoured things. Jon had thought about feeding him with the, um, spoils of war, before. He had even considered fucking cooked it. But he expected Tribbles would turn his nose up at it.

Still. He wasn't about to try it himself, so he couldn't really talk, could he?

He pondered sticking the blade into the workbench like twat, you know, to be cool, but there was no camera filming him so he couldn't watch it back later, and with the day he was having, either the blade would snap, fucking up his knife block set, or he'd miss the workbench entirely and impale his leg, splitting that really important artery in there. He would bleed out there, on the dirty floor of his workshop with Tribbles trying to share his body heat with him, as Jon's splashed out into the sawdust.

A week later he would be found when someone from work finally missed him and called the police. Jon, stabbed in the leg and bled out, and a dead teenage boy whose only external trauma was some shitty hacking with a blunt knife against his arm, of which no blood came from because he was already dead. It would be a chin-scratcher, for sure.

Tribbles would be fine. He'd go feral, sure. Or Dolly, the woman who lives in the house across the field would feed him. That last one, probably. He's a whiney little fuck. Always wants his chicken flavoured things. Crunchy or hard, as long as it's chicken. He had wandered away from the

corpse, bored already. He slipped out through the crack in the door into the garden.

Jon put the knife down on the workbench.

He was in some limbo between bored and pissed off with all this by this point, so he quickly decided to come back to it later. He looked at the time. He should hit the sack soon anyway. He had work in the morning.

Friday tomorrow.

Takeaway night.

C H A P T E R 2

Jon was sitting at his desk, tired. He should have gone to bed earlier last night. Or had a drink before he hit the sack. Something. Anything. He got into bed around one in the morning, and all he could do was lay there and look at that fucking stain on the ceiling. The one from where the header tank in the attic leaked last year. He was staring at it, thinking about how much he needed to get new curtains. If he had new curtains, he wouldn't have been able to see the stain on the ceiling in the middle of the night, because of the light coming in the window from the fucking cars passing on the road. Yes, even from that distance their lights slid across the ceiling in abundance. Also, getting laid might help, but that was a completely different story. *And* he was thinking about murder. Not any particular murder. He was just thinking about the act in general. He was thinking about how many lies were in books and on TV.

Jon had seen a film only the week before where a woman got slashed across the throat with a chef's knife. She held the slit that appeared, gripping her throat, looked surprised, and then straight up died at the table. In the middle of the restaurant. And no one noticed. Jon had wondered if the writers had ever slit someone's throat before. While he had never slit anyone's throat, he assumed that the flapping about would be something to be beheld. It would be so bad that anyone would think you'd injected them with PCP. And this *misrepresentation* in the media is so common. It's nauseating. A guy gets stabbed in the gut and brushes it off. Getting stabbed in the gut hurts like a mother fucker. Not that Jon had personal experience of being stabbed in the gut. No scars there. Strangulation. That's another one. The kid Jon had offed was a strangulation. Now according to the TV he should have been able to grip the throat tightly, and squeeze. There would be that gargling sound. They might have weakly grabbed hold of his wrists. They might have pawed at his face with the strength of a kitten but that would be about it.

Lies.

Not only does someone having the air taken from their lungs fight like a bastard, but they struggle and squirm like, well, Tribbles when he needs to have his flea treatment. Jon hadn't done it before—the strangling, not the

flea treatment—so he thought he'd use a smaller test subject. Which was just as well really. Should he have bravely tried to take on someone full sized then he might have seriously regretted it.

That was what he was thinking about in bed last night. Murder. It was one of his hobbies. Not murder, obviously. But thinking about it.

So Jon was sitting there, shagged, when Dave walked in. Dave worked in one of the chemical departments. Jon didn't really know much about what the company he worked for actually *did*. He knew that they made chemical compounds that they sold on to a variety of multi-national pharm companies. Something like that. Jon was a data-input clerk.

Dave was a bit of a twat, all said, but the two of them had managed at some point in the past to strike up something of a conversation, and for some reason Dave had thought that Jon either cared, or wanted to be friends or some such. Being pseudo friends with him did have a couple of advantages that stopped Jon from telling him to fuck right off. Well, those, and the fact that Jon despised confrontation. The first, and most notable advantage, was that Dave was generous to a fault. This meant that on most Fridays when the two of them slipped to the pub around the corner for a swift half or three at lunchtime, Dave would pay for more than his fair share. The second, was that Dave had two cars, and being such a generous chap, he had lent his second motor to Jon a couple of months back when Jon's had shit it's last. Having a car was kind of a necessity for Jon's hobbies at this point.

Another soon to be advantage was that Dave was an ugly cunt, and Jon needed a wingman. Being the better looking of the two when *hunting pussy* was a solid plus. Jon giggled inwardly. Dave had no idea.

"So," Dave said. "Out for a half about twelve?"

Jon looked at the time in the corner of the computer screen. Only half an hour to go. "Yep." They worked flexi-time at the office and Jon always put a bit in here and there during the week so that should Dave be feeling extra generous, he could afford to stay in the pub for a good couple of hours. If he got too plastered, he'd just go home at three-thirty, and make up the time next week.

But that wasn't going to happen today.

He had plans for tonight, and going to the pub with Dave was just the beginning.

—

Dave cocked his pool cue at Jon. “You are one jammy shit.”

Jon shot him a wink. Yes. Yes, he was, but he wasn’t going to let on. He’d just sunk his last red and was lining up the black. He leaned down on the cue and took mild aim. He glanced up to the clock that hung over the bar. They’d already been there nearly an hour and Jon hadn’t spoken to Dave about tonight yet. He looked to Dave before taking aim again. He needed to butter him up. Better fuck this one. Jon struck the cue ball on the side and hadn’t chalked his tip in a couple of shots. The cue ball made this sickly clunk and span off wildly to the side.

“Well.” Dave said. “Not so shit hot now, are we?” He watched the balls clatter together. “Two shots to me, I believe.”

“Yep.” Jon stood up and picked up the chalk, aimlessly scraping it against the tip of the cue. “So, you got any plans for tonight?”

Dave walked around the table looking for his shot. “Not really. Why?” He crouched, trying to look professional. Jon didn’t think it was working.

“I was wondering if you fancied going out for a pint?”

Dave stood and squinted at him. “On a Friday night?”

“It’s not such a strange request, is it?” In all truth, actually, it *was* a pretty strange request. Yes, Dave had lent him a car, but it hadn’t bought its way into Jon’s affections or anything. It was to the point where even Dave had probably realised that Jon was holding him at arm’s length.

“Why?”

Jon stared him straight in the eye. “Why not?”

Dave shrugged and leaned in for a shot. He hit the ball he was going for, but failed spectacularly on the pot. He sighed and looked at the floor.

“Your shot again,” Jon reminded him.

Dave nodded, and started back around the table. “All right,” he said. “Let’s say I’m interested. Where, and when?”

Jon wanted to play it casual, but he knew. He knew exactly where he wanted to go. “I was thinking The Elephant. That’s only a short walk from your place, right? Hit it about eight, maybe nine, and stick around ‘til close.” This was all true, however, Jon had left out one detail.

Dave nodded. “I suppose.” He took his next shot, sinking a yellow. He gave a stupid little punch in the air.

“Twat,” Jon whispered too quiet to be heard.

“But don’t you have *work* to do?”

Jon feigned innocence. “What?” he asked, regretting the day he’d ever mentioned it.

“I thought you were writing some opus magnus novel or something. Lord of the Twinks? Something like that.”

“Not quite.” It was true, Jon was writing a novel. But it wasn’t going quite as planned. It was far harder than he’d previously imagined, and research online wasn’t the way forward. No. He’d started off well enough, watching Youtube video after video, joining all the right groups on Facebook, and crafting a wonderfully intricate Machiavellian plot that would have put Shakespeare himself to shame.

And then he’d started writing it. He’d gotten about one page of words down on his laptop when he’d hit a brick wall. It was a small brick wall, yet somewhat stupidly unscalable. His protagonist was a dry witted, sharp, unapproachable cop. He was tracking a serial killer. A real nasty one. One night he’s come home to his New York apartment picking up Chinese on the way. Like Jon had seen in all the movies. Then he realised that he couldn’t write the scene of this dude eating the noodles, because the videos online of people eating noodles didn’t help him to explain eating noodles. It was all a bit of a head fuck.

Needless to say, Jon had ordered in Chinese that night, for the first time trying noodles. It was an experience that he wouldn’t repeat, much preferring the rice dishes of his normal choice, but it did let him in on the whimsy of being able to write about their texture. But from there, writing had become more about research than anything else, and the pages weren’t exactly flowing. Sure, he was learning a lot about a choice number of subjects, but the actual book wasn’t being written.

He'd actually managed to put down more words arguing with people on Twitter over *process* than actually putting words on the page.

"Hello?" Dave waved at him from across the table. "Where have you drifted off to?"

"Hm? Oh. Sorry. Yeah, no, I mean, a night away from the masterpiece won't hurt will it?"

"I guess we're on then."

Good, thought Jon. *Good*.

C H A P T E R 3

The Elephant was fucking packed with the most infuriating collection of people that were all just like Dave. Jon took a sip of his beer. He wanted to take it easy and it was nearly closing time. The pub closed its doors at eleven, just in time for the nightclubs to busy up.

The end game.

Dave was a little pissed. He was saying something to Jon about the necessity to have a royal government or something. It was hard line political shit that Jon new better than to talk about either in polite company, or whilst drinking. The two of them were crammed onto a small two seater table near enough to the door that people kept knocking Dave's arm and spilling his beer onto the table. None of which mattered to Jon. He had a plan that involved his wingman being as unattractive as possible—shit-faced would do it—and him, sober enough to drive legally. The last thing he wanted tonight was an altercation with some do-gooding bobby who might remember his face.

He needed tonight to work out because there was only so much you could learn from re-runs of Morse.

"Right," Dave said pushing himself to stand. "I need a piss." He wobbled, spinning his arms slightly to regain balance, before heading off in the direction of the bogs.

Jon poured the rest of his pint into Dave's glass and waited for him to return.

The bell went for last orders. Perfect timing.

Dave reappeared and slouched into his chair, not noticing the extra beer he had. He did notice that Jon's glass was dry. "You want another?" He reached into his pocket, fishing for his wallet.

"Nah, mate." Jon waved for him to stop. "Just drink up and we'll be on our way. I'll walk you home." *Along the clifftops. Near the club.*

Dave nodded. Even his nodding seemed to be slurred. "'Kay." He necked his beer, and then looked like he was going to puke for a few

seconds. That seemed to pass, and then he stood. “Come then, Bartlet, let us go.” He pointed to the door like he was away on a crusade.

And Jon didn’t know who or what Bartlet was either. He stood, apologised to everyone he clashed with, and everyone Dave weaved into as they made their way out of the bar, until they were in the cool night air.

Dave drew in a long breath. “Shit,” he whispered. “It was loud in there.”

“Yes,” Jon replied. He took Dave by the arm and led him down the next turning to the right, running perpendicular to the seafront. It brought them out onto the road that ran along the cliffs, only a few minutes later. They turned left towards the sands, and Dave’s flat—but not before they would need to pass *The Club Fashionix*.

The sleaziest meat market in the county.

—

Jon dragged Dave across the street to the path on the other side, helping him back to his feet as he stumbled over the curb. “I don’t really want to,” Dave was saying.

Jon faced him and rested his hands on his shoulders. “Look,” Jon said. “Just a quick one. I want to know what it’s like in there.”

Fashionix was *renowned*. It was a shitty club to be sure. There was no way that it wasn’t going to be, even from the rep alone. There wasn’t even a proper bouncer on the door. There was just this skeevey looking geezer who took ten pounds from Jon just to let them in. Jon wasn’t overly worldly when it came to clubs and nightlife outside of pubs, but even *he* was surprised when the guy didn’t try to sell them drugs.

He did ponder though, that should someone in here try to sell him drugs he should definitely buy some, regardless of whether he knew what to do with them or not.

The inside of the club was surprisingly small and very, very loud. The building was juxtaposed into a rock face, which hid the actual size of the place. It was disappointingly lacking in grandeur. The doors led straight to the dance floor. There was no coat drop or anything. The dance floor was about the size of a double driveway, and directly attached to that was the

bar. Over to the left was a door with a stick man and stick woman over it that led to the toilets.

That was it.

Worse, there were so few people in there that Jon could see it all.

And the music. It was distorted to shit, so badly in fact, that all Jon could discern was a thumping baseline.

Donk. Donk. Donk.

Dave weaved straight onto the dance floor, around the two women dancing together in the centre of it—the only two people on it—and hit the bar. Jon looked around as if he was looking for someone that he might be meeting there. It was just a ruse to allow him to scope out the clientele. It was poor pickings, needless to say. There were the two women on the dance floor. They were probably dykes. There was a guy sat in the corner, where the bar met the wall, who seemed interested in the fact that the two of them had just entered. Probably the drug dealer. Jon nodded at him as an acquaintance. There were a group of likely lads sat at one of the tables to the right, who looked well gone. Probably drinking in here because of the time, rather than the …

Jon looked around again.

… company.

He started over to the bar. The two women stopped dancing long enough to look at him. Hm. Jon smiled at them. Threesome? It was a possibility he hadn't thought of until that second. He went to swerve from his trajectory to the bar, to target them, when Dave shouted, "'Ere, Jon, the beer in here is fucking expensive."

Jon smiled awkwardly at the two women. "Excuse me," he said.

They couldn't hear him.

He pointed to the bar, an extension of his apology, and walked off towards Dave.

He slid up on the barstool next to him. "The fuck, man?"

"What?" Dave asked, oblivious.

"I was about to score." Jon nodded over to the two women who had started dancing again.

"No fucking way." Dave gawped at them. "Which one?"

Jon shrugged. "Both, I suppose."

Dave seemed to need to swing his whole body around to face Jon again. He raised his eyebrows. "Good," he said. He seemed to mean it. "You should. It not something you'll forget. Not ever." The way Dave looked at him spoke volumes.

No. Way.

Dave was way too shit faced to be making this up. Dave. Ugly cunt Dave had a threesome at some point. What the fuck? Jon picked up the 'fucking expensive' beer that Dave had purchased at the bar and sucked on it. Stupid clubs only selling beer in bottles and not glasses like cultured folk. "When the fuck did you shag two birds at once?"

"No time for that." Dave grabbed Jon's face by the chin and turned his head. The two women were heading over to them.

"Fuck," Jon muttered. He only needed one of them. Hell, he only wanted one of them for now, but surely he needed to take this opportunity. Maybe it wouldn't present itself again in the near future? Jon let his head drop to the side as he pondered. Or maybe it would if he came in here more often. Maybe without Ugly Dave.

Then the music stopped. The sudden silence was deafening, and the only thing Jon could hear for a second was the buzzing in his ears. He hoped it wasn't permanent damage. One of the women took up on the side of Dave and the other on the side of Jon. Maybe this was going differently than he had imagined. Jon looked at Dave's now they were a little closer. She wasn't very … old. Jon shot a look at his. Same. Eighteen at best. Younger at worse.

Fuck it. They must have been carded to get in here. He glanced over to the weirdo on the door. *Or not*. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Jon turned to Dave to ask him to have a quick word, and leg it. Dave already had his tongue in the girl's mouth and a hand up her skirt.

What the …? When did …?

Come Monday morning, when the two of them were in work and sober, Jon needed to ask Dave what his lines were. Line. He hadn't had time to use more than one. Jon looked at the girl who appeared to have now taken

residence on his arm. “Hi?” he said, unsure of himself. He just wished the music would restart and give him time to think.

“Hi,” She answered. She sounded sober-ish. That was something. “Gonna buy a girl a drink?” she asked.

Jon put his sense of humour in check and didn’t ask if she was old enough to buy one herself. “Here,” he passed his bottle to her. “I don’t have cooties.”

She took a slug from the shit European lager-piss. Then she stared at Dave and her friend, now fully entwined. She stared at them for too long. It made Jon uncomfortable. He turned to her, getting her attention back on him. “So,” he said.

“So,” she echoed.

“What’s nice girl like you—”

“I’ve heard that one before.” She gestured around the bar. “See that guy in the corner?”

“The dealer?” Jon nodded.

“I wish. No. He’s tried it on with me tonight. So’s Tommy on the door.”

Jon looked over to the man stood on the door. He was on the outside of the club, but staring in through the glass at them. “Right,” Jon replied.

“Anyway,” she continued. “It’s nearly midnight, and me and Ems don’t have a place to go. Well, I don’t.” She nodded to Ems and Dave. “She has, apparently.”

Jon should have thought this through more. He needed pick up lines. Stat.

She seemed to pick up on his hesitation. “Do you want me to come back to your place?” she asked.

“I don’t even know your name,” Jon replied. *What the fuck are you doing? Say yes!*

“Lily. You call me Lily-Pad once and we’re done.”

“Gotcha.”

C H A P T E R 4

Dave was wasted. They had managed to get him back to his flat, but there was no way he was going to be able to fuck Ems, that was for sure. Although, she didn't see that put out. Jon leaned him against the front door of the building. "You got your keys?" he asked.

Dave muttered something unintelligible, and then grunted some sort of affirmative. "Where's …" his voice trailed off, probably realising that he didn't know Ems name.

"Good man." Jon patted him on the shoulder and turned back to the two girls. "I'm just parked around the corner."

—

The three of them got into Jon's borrowed car. Ems in the back and Lily in the front. Jon started the engine. He looked at Ems in the mirror. Damn. Three's a crowd. He was just going to have to go through with the threesome and try to get his research done another night. He headed towards the edge of town, and drove past the shitty council estate where that big fire was last month.

Before he reached the double roundabouts leading out onto the dual carriageways towards the city, Jon hooked a left into a dirt track—his driveway—that led to his house. It was pitch black out there, and you'd shoot past the drive without even seeing it if you didn't know it was already there. The track was half gravel and half dirt, giving an eerie crushing wet sound as you drove over it.

He pulled up outside the front door, and turned the engine off.

Ems was staring into her phone in the backseat, but Lily was staring up at the house with her mouth open. "I didn't know you had money," she said.

Jon rented the old farm house. It was set in between two fields outside the edge of town, with the next nearest house—Dolly's—being a good hundred yards away, yomping across a potato field. It was big, sure, had a small amount of surrounding land too. Enough to have a shed, a workshop, and a garage. The building was rendered white, and pretty dilapidated. That

was how he had managed to afford it on his data entry wage. The guy who owned the fields just wanted a tenant so the place didn't get squatters or some shit. And Jon needed nothing except privacy. Which this place gave him in abundance. He was free to wander the surrounding fields and sparse woodland, allowing his mind to wander and give him time to think. To plot, and plan, if you will. It was perfect. Jon was snapped from his musings about the house when he noticed the door to the workshop was still ajar. That body was still on the floor in there. He should clean that up tomorrow. "Well," he said, "one doesn't like to brag." *One has nothing to brag about*. "Coming in?" He opened the door and got out, leaning over the driver's seat to Ems. "Coffee?" he asked.

She replied with a disdainful look.

Inside the front door, the centre stairwell led up to the first floor and there was a door on the left, and one on the right. "Living room." He pointed to the one on the left. "Kitchen." And then the one on the right. Then he nodded at the stairs. "Bedrooms and bathroom."

Ems looked up from her phone for the first time. "You got any blow?"

Jon thought for a second. He probably shouldn't admit to not knowing what blow was. He raised his hands out flat. "All out, I'm afraid. Coffee?" he asked again.

She shrugged and turned into the living room, returning her gaze to her phone, then going and sitting on the sofa.

Lily tugged on Jon's arm. "Leave her," she said. "Where's that coffee?"

Jon was balls deep in Lily. She had the body of a racehorse. Wait. That wasn't right. He was trying to maintain rhythm, and not ejaculate too quickly, so he was focussing in on how to put a sex scene down on paper. Racehorse. She was fit, and slender, but perhaps not the best choice of words. She was on her hands and knees and Jon was behind her, grinding against her. "Fuck me, Daddy," she whimpered.

Daddy. *What the fuck*. "Yeah …" Jon hesitated. " … Girl." He shook his head. That was terrible. In his novel the serial killer was going to fuck some chick in one of the opening chapters. He'd do it like this. Be in control. Be the man. He had to have better lines than Jon. And now was the

perfect time to find out if they were any good. Use her as a sounding board. "Yeah," he tried again. "Are you Daddies little girl?" He pushed his cock in her harder.

"Oh yes." she sounded like she was going to cum. "Harder Daddy," she said.

That one seemed to work. Jon responded in kind and gave her what she asked for. He pushed harder. "Bitch," he said.

She arched her back and stopped moving. "What?"

"Sorry," he muttered. She didn't seem to like that one. He kept rhythm hoping she would restart the motion. She didn't.

She crawled forward sliding off his cock, and rolled over onto her back. "What did you call me?" she asked.

Damn it. "Bitch?" he answered quietly, and unsure.

"You think I'm a bitch?" She glowered at him.

"No, of course not—"

"Aaaah." She grinned and pointed at him. "Gotcha."

"The fuck." He was starting to go flaccid already.

"Quick," she said, turning back over and laying on her belly. "Fuck me in the arse before that thing disappears."

Anal? Jon looked at her butt cheeks. He'd never … well he'd thought about it, sure … didn't you need lube? "I don't have any lube."

"Ride me dry," she answered.

Right. *Well*. His cock was solid again, so he plunged it into her arse. He pushed it in as far as he could. It was surprisingly easy. The thought crossed his mind that she may not have washed properly before coming out tonight —not expecting anal—and he should be prepared for that. He turned his focus to the feelings. The actions. He had to remember them for later. Her arse was tighter than her snatch. Good detail.

"Choke me," she said, suddenly.

Choking. *Oh no*. "What?"

"Choke me like the bitch I am," she said. She was talking into the pillow and kind of hard to hear.

"Okay." Jon wrapped his fingers around her neck, his thumbs in the nape at the back of it. She was small. Slight. His fingers enclosed her neck completely, meeting at the front. He squeezed, gently at first, rhythmically fucking her arse.

"Harder," she said.

Jon did as he was told. This was real power. Serial killer power. This was what his killer would do to show the woman he was fucking, no, *dominating*, who the boss was. Show her who was in charge. He was close to cumming. He feel the burn rising up from his cock. "I'm cumming," he said, pushing harder, faster. He pounded back and forth to the vinegar stroke. "Can I cum inside you?" *Too late*. He felt the rise of the orgasm, and the sudden man-made lube inside her, as he rocked back and forth slowing. He let go of her neck and slid out of her, flopping onto the bed next to her. "God," he said. "Did you cum too?"

She didn't answer. Probably recuperating from his amazing performance.

He brought air into his lungs, feeling somewhat warm and fuzzy. He couldn't use the word fuzzy, not for the serial killer. Maybe, spent. Maybe, *invigorated*. "Jesus." He propped himself up on one elbow. He looked at her sloppy arse. "Do you want a towel or something?"

She didn't respond. He got up from the bed and padded naked across to the clothes he'd strewn to the floor not half an hour ago. He picked up his tee shirt and tossed it onto her. She still didn't move. Jon went and sat next to her on the bed. "You okay …" *Shit. What was her name again?* "… love?" He rocked her by the shoulders. "You can't stay here all night." She was unresponsive. "Fuck." Jon rolled her over and her eyes stared lifelessly into the ceiling. "Oh dear," he said. "I fucked the life out of her." His shoulders slumped and he took the tee shirt and dabbed at the cum that was dribbling onto the sheets. *Damn. Another body to get rid of.*

This was all becoming a bit of a bind. Sure, he needed to learn this stuff to increase the authenticity of his novel, but for fuck's sake, he now had what people would consider *a pile* of bodies. Two was a pile, right? Oh, God. Had he stepped over the blurred line, becoming his own fiction? Was he a *serial killer* now? He picked up his jeans from the floor and took his phone from the pocket quickly opening Google. *How many kills makes you a serial killer?* he typed. *Three or more murders in a time period greater*

than a month, it told him. Shit. There was what's-her-name here, the guy in the shed—he never did get his name—, and the woman he stabbed up last week. Three, but not in a time period greater than a month. So what was he? A mass murderer? Was that *even* better?

A door slammed somewhere else in the house.

"Oh shit," Jon exclaimed, tossing his phone to the bed. He'd forgotten about the other one. Jon got up and left the bedroom naked. He was still at half mast. He ran down the stairs and opened the door to the living room. *Shit*. She wasn't there. He turned and pulled the door to the kitchen open. It was an old fashioned farmers kitchen. Nice. She was standing in the centre of the room, her phone still in her hand, and she was gazing around like a stoned deer.

She looked at his cock and smiled. "I was just looking for a drink," she said, her eyes drifting up his body to his face. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

Jon strode over to her and slapped the phone from her hands, it smashing on the stone tile floor. A look of horror crossed the girl's face, but before she had time to react, Jon punched her as hard as he could. She dropped like a sack of shit, collapsing to the floor, apparently unconscious. Jon made a weak incomprehensible sound, and he spun around on the floor. "Think, think," he said. "Oh, Jeez. Body in the bedroom. One in the shed." He looked at Ems. "And maybe her."

Calm yourself. What would a proper psycho do? That was the way to think about it. Use it as a learning experience. *Tonight might be a complete shitshow, but you ended up bringing two girls back home. You nutted. It's not all bad.*

He looked at Ems. He needed to find out if she was dead. Crouching down, he rested his forefinger on her neck. He couldn't feel a pulse, but wasn't sure if he was feeling in the right place. He leaned further over the body and a gently slapped her face. Nothing. Hm. Maybe she *was* dead.

Suddenly Ems drew in a sharp breath and opened her eyes. The two of them stared at each other, their faces close. Then she screamed.

"Fuck," Jon shouted. He grabbed her head and slammed it back into the tile floor. She stopped screaming. "Now listen," he said. "Hello?"

Blood pooled out from under her.

"Ah, shit."

Jon placed his fingers on her eyelids and closed them. He slumped cross-legged to the floor and sat on the cold tiles. “Well,” he said. “This is going well.”

C H A P T E R 5

The One He Stabbed Up Last Week

Jon was sitting at the keyboard tapping his finger lightly on the J. He wasn't pressing it hard enough for it to input a J on to the screen. He was tapping it out of frustration. The idea of the novel was to jump from point of view to point of view in alternating chapters. The first was from the hardboiled detective. The *much-noodle-chomping* Rick Stronglaw. The name wasn't set in stone, by the way. That first chapter was finally done, and Jon even had the leftovers in the fridge to prove it. In the second chapter the unnamed serial killer was to take his first victim. A young woman. She was supposed to be walking through a park in New York when he jumped her. Jon hadn't decided which park yet. Central Park was the obvious choice, but perhaps too obvious. There were connotations towards certain sitcoms of the previous decade, and it was so gauche. Everyone used Central. No. He wanted somewhere else. Somewhere more … *indie*. But that was for another day. He tapped the J again. He was still on the first page of the chapter. The first line.

Jon looked at the clock. It was eleven. He had no work tomorrow, so fuck it. He rolled the chair back and got up, closing the laptop lid. He went and took his coat off the back of the door of the spare bedroom and went downstairs. Leaving through the front door.

It was cold.

He got in his—all right, *Dave's*—car and pulled out onto the main road, heading back towards town. There were three or four parks within easy driving distance, and Jon knew he would need the largest. He drove to the one near the fancy estate—Tree Bay Park. He found a space in the smallest car park that it had to offer and left the car there. The park was big enough to get lost in.

Well, not literally, but it was big for the area.

Jon started walking through the park. There were lampposts scattered intermittently along the pathway, but leaving that, the grassland was completely baron of light. It was gone midnight and when Jon could barely see the car, he knew he had ventured far enough in. That was when he suddenly felt conscious of how alone and vulnerable he was. The cold air cutting across his face. The darkness in all directions. Wind whispering around him. He wished he'd brought a notepad. This shit was *gold*. He breathed in the air. In the distance, somewhere on the wind, he heard a laugh. A man. Then another. A second one. They were making noises like demented jackals.

Jon squinted towards the car in the distance again, and realised he was scared.

Then the voices returned. They were closer.

He started back towards the car. At first he thought it was a good idea to remain calm, and keep a steady, slow pace. He tried not to look around. Don't look scared. That was the best thing. Don't show weakness.

The calls of the jackals came closer.

"Fuck that," he muttered, breaking into a run from a near standing start. He bolted along the path, staying in the light. As he ran he could barely keep his legs under him. *Stupid jelly legs. Flabby useless fucking things. Fucking ancestors used to run from fucking dinosaurs—*

Jackals.

He let out a weak cry and ran harder, struggling to get enough air into his lungs to stay conscious, let alone fuel flat-out sprinting.

Jon braved a look over his shoulder. They were there. Shadows dashing through the park from all directions. The howling was louder. There was several of them. He stopped himself from looking back, knowing he was only going to slow himself down, and refraining from getting into his own head. Just get back to the car.

He reached the car park and they were close. But he could make it.

He vaulted over the short wall, and managed to land on his feet on the other side, fumbling in his pockets for the keys to the car. He pressed the button as he bounded over to it, and the car raised the relieving *beep* as the

locks released. He opened the door and threw himself into the driver's seat, slamming the door and locking it with his elbow. Sweat splattered his brow. He fought to get his breath back, and he watched, keenly into the darkness as the shadows came.

Three young teenagers ran out from the black. They were Naruto running with their coats held back like fucking Superman capes and making aeroplane noises. Fuck.

Jon punched the steering wheel. Point proven, though. Experience. That was the way forward. None of this research online. Fucking write what you know. *Heh. They were right. Maybe Jack the Ripper was Charles Dickens?*

Looking at his hand, Jon was happy that he'd stopped shaking. He started the car and returned home.

Sat at the keyboard, Jon's fingers flew. The park and the feelings, and the fear, fresh in his mind. He described the woman walking in the park intricately. She was being watched by the killer from the darkness, away from the pathway. She was scared. Alone. The killer was ready to pounce. He had a blade. Long one. He was going to use it to … Jon stopped typing. To what? Tear her up? Slash her?

He tapped the J.

Fuck.

Saturday Night. Technically, Sunday morning. Jon sat in his car. It was in the same parking space at the same park as last night. It was one in the morning. He had the car locked, and his hands resting on the steering wheel. *Was he really going to do this?* He relaxed into the seat and watched the park. He looked into the darkness. His fingers found the hilt of the kitchen knife he had brought with him, sitting on the passenger seat. It felt cold. Hard. But powerful. Yes. Yes he was going to do this.

Jon took the knife and got out on to the tarmac. He slipped it into the inside pocket of his leather jacket and locked the car. He looked around, trying to be casual. There was no one that he could see. Maybe there were

people watching him from the darkness, but if they were, they'd been there for some time. He himself had been sitting in the car there for over an hour mulling the idea of stabbing someone around in his head. The long and the short of it was that if he was to get into the head of a serial killer, he would have to become a serial killer. It was the only way, surely? He left the car, heading into the park, walking around the wall and through the low gates. He stuck to the path.

If there was any weirdness—like there was last night—he was going to avoid contact at all costs. The last thing he needed right now was to get into any sort of kerfuffle with a bunch of kids in the park in the middle of the night. He might get labelled as a pedo. Also, in any heightened state of fear, he might stab one of them, and the knife he brought was pretty fucking big. He wanted it to work, so brought the biggest one. It would probably do a job on a kid.

He walked to the centre of the park. No contact with the locals. Good. There was a playground—swings and such—and a building that had the toilets on one side and an ice cream shop on the other. He could have gone an ice cream but it was shut. The toilets however, were open, and he *did* need a piss. Probably the cold. He wasn't, however, about to go into a set of public toilets in the early hours. He knew what went on in them at this time.

Jon sidled over to the building and around the back to a small clump of trees. He stared into them waiting for his eyes to adjust, making sure there weren't any perverts lurking in there or anything, and then he had a piss up the side of one of the trees. He angled himself so he could see anyone walking down the path, but he was, in all truth, starting to feel a little dejected. He'd seen no one walking in the park since he'd entered.

Maybe the parks in New York were different.

He shook his head. Or maybe they weren't. He only had his imagination to thank for the fact that there was a woman walking through *that* park in the middle of the night. He still pissed. It was a long one. Maybe too long? How much piss was too much piss?

Jon was pulled from his thoughts when a woman walked into view. She was sticking to the path—as was to be expected, it was fucking terrifying in there, after all—and he had to strain to stop. Once you start, and all that. He pushed his cock back into his fly and zipped himself up. He checked on the

knife, still correct and present, and left the trees, staying to the shadows away from the path.

There was no one else around. That fit perfectly. He could shadow her until she got closer to the car park and that way he was closer to his escape. She seemed unaware of him. She didn't seem to have any music on, no earbuds or anything, and she was striding with purpose, but not hurrying. She was wearing a long raincoat, and had high heels on. That boded well.

Harder to run in.

Jon stalked her until they were within a gnat's dick of the car park and he made his move. He came from the shadows and joined the path just behind her. He could see her tense up as he did. She knew he was there, or she could feel him approach.

She half-turned, looking over her shoulder without slowing her pace. She was close to the car park and freedom, and she knew it.

"Excuse me," Jon said.

This clearly threw her. She was obviously expecting him to jump her. She still didn't stop walking though. "What can I do for you?" she answered.

"I was wondering …" Jon quickened his pace to come up level with her, at the same time pulling the knife from his pocket, and holding it down by the side of his leg, out of sight.

She sidestepped away from him.

"No, don't." Jon raised the knife and stepped across the front of her. She came to a standstill.

"What do you want?" she asked, surprisingly calmly.

He really should have pretended to rob her, but his mind was racing. He was examining the look on her face. The way she was looking at the knife and not him. He could see her breath in the cold air. She was breathing quickly. Shallow. Hard. "I'm doing research," he blurted and then lunged the knife forward.

It was an awkward stab at an awkward angle. She didn't have time to move, and so the blade went where he had intended, but in his mind's eye it had played out a little differently. He was expecting to … see more, perhaps. Still, it was too late for that now.

The blade slipped into her stomach with surprising ease. It was up to the hilt before Jon knew it. Both he and the woman stared at each other in surprise, just for a second, before Jon withdrew the blade. He looked at it. It was covered in blood. Smeared. He said, "Fucking hell." Then he looked at her. She was still looking at him. She hadn't moved.

Shock, he guessed.

Then she screamed. It was a short, electric scream. Nothing that the amateur slasher—that's what he was now, wasn't it?—would expect. No Jamie Lee Curtis here. No, this was more feeble than that. She grabbed at herself, at the wound, and then started to break for it.

Jon watched her at first. He didn't know what he was expecting, which was the point of all this, but he was at least expecting her to fall over, or die, or something. She was weaving towards the car park still, and making a bit of a racket. Jon snapped out of it and charged after her. "Shit, shit, shit," he wheezed, suddenly finding the desire to kill having left him. He felt like he'd just had a wank and suddenly found the porn mag dirty. Unclean. But there was no time for that now.

He caught up with her with relative ease, what with her bleeding profusely. The blade was about eight inches long. She was quite slender. It must have gone almost all the way through her. *Cool*. He raised the blade and brought it down in a stabbing motion as he reached her, and the blade seemed to bounce off her. He realised that it must have scraped and bounced off her spine, what with him holding it up like an eighties horror movie villain. This research was *really* helping. The movies just made stuff up didn't they? It's not that easy at all. *Although* the blade had gone in really easily. He changed his grip on the knife, holding it more like he was about to be in a knife fight—or not, depending on whether the movies were lying about that too—and stabbed it into her, this time lower, trying to miss the bones.

It slid in again.

She stopped screaming, and running, and turned to face him. Her mouth was open in shock. Her eyebrows sagged like she was worried, and she'd managed to get a look of pleading into her eyes. It was quite funny really.

Then Jon did something. To this day he didn't know why he'd done it. It just seemed like a good idea at the time.

He poked his finger in her gaping mouth, and said "Suck it." Then he started to laugh. The whole situation seemed utterly ridiculous at this stage, and with her standing there with her mouth open like a sex doll, it at least broke the tension.

She pulled away from him, uninspired by the finger thing, still clutching her gut wound, and started to scream again. Her free hand was flapping about around the back of her, trying to find the wound there, perhaps to cradle it. She looked like it really smarted.

But she was making too much noise, and Jon felt the research should end now. He'd learned a surprising amount though. He looked at her and then the knife. How should he do this? He twisted the knife one way and then another trying to decide, before she looked like she was going to bolt again. So he stabbed her in the head.

"Stupid," he said, as she reeled around in a circle with his kitchen knife protruding from her skull, imbedded only an inch in. At least she'd stopped screaming. But now she seemed to be stumbling around like *The Mummy*. She even had her hands out in front of her. Jon looked around making sure that no one was watching. "Fuck," he said, kicking her over. She went down with ease, perhaps now with some brain damage. He hunched over her as she flailed about silently on the floor, and pulled the knife out. Then he stabbed it in to her gut region again and again until she stopped moving. "Fucking hell," he said, standing. He was winded. That was hard work.

No wonder serial killers always look like they need to eat a pie.

He looked at the bloody mess on the path. Shit. He hadn't planned for what to do next. He looked at the knife in his hand and down at the blood on his jacket and jeans. He probably looked guilty of something. Stuffing the blade back into the inside pocket of his jacket he picked up the woman's feet and dragged her off the path into the darkness. He pulled her over the grass to the first copse of trees and left her in the taller grass. That would do.

Then he hurried back to the car and got in. He was dripping in bits of stuff that shouldn't be on the outside of whoever they belonged to, let alone someone they didn't. He locked the car door and waited to get his breath back. He was sweating, and the windows of the car started to steam up. Jon thrust the keys into the ignition and started the engine, turning on the window blower.

He had to go. He knew that no matter what he was doing here, now, he must look guilty of something. And then there was all the blood.

He flipped the lights on, and in the distance in the park he could see a figure walking. It couldn't be her. Someone walking home. Taking the same stupid shortcut she had probably. What if they'd seen? Jon shook his head. *Don't be so stupid*. He reversed the car out of the space and left the car park, being sure to drive carefully. The last thing he needed was to be pulled over by some do-gooder copper for *driving without due care and attention*.

It's jam, he would say if he got pulled over. *I had a massive jam accident*, and then plead insanity.

C H A P T E R 6

The Present

Jon dragged Ems by the feet from the front door of the house. It was the early hours of the morning, in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing to hide from until it was light at least. Still, he had put some trousers and a shirt on. He pulled her over the shed door and shouldered it open, tussling with the corpse to get it through the door.

Tribbles was laying against the workbench. He raised his head, looked at Jon and then relaxed, closing his eyes.

"There you are," Jon said, wheezing with the strain. "You could help," he joked. "But I can see you're busy." He pulled Ems over to the other side of the workbench, next to the body of the young man and laid her next to him. "Lovely couple," he said.

He returned to the house and went upstairs. He looked at the corpse of what's-her-name, still naked on the bed. Hm. He went over and sat next to her. He touched the skin on her breast. It was cold now. He lifted her arm. She wasn't stiff yet. He decided to keep a note of how long rigor mortis took to kick in. He rolled her over onto the back and looked at her. He'd done well pulling that. Pity he'd choked the life out of her. Well, he *was* going to kill her anyway, that was the point of her coming back here, until at least the other one tagged along. He wondered how all this had come to pass. The other one obviously wanted Dave, so why come back here? She wasn't interested in a threesome. Well, all she seemed to want to do was sit on the sofa and text, or whatever she was doing. Jon looked at the body again. He touched her nipple. Cold. Hard. It felt like she was excited.

His cock twitched.

Jon withdrew his hand. *Well, it would be in the name of research*, he thought, returning his fingers to her breast. He squeezed it. Apart from the coolness to the touch it was like she was asleep. He let his hand run down her belly to the small strip of hair above her pussy. He let his hand slip in

between her legs. He could feel the coldness of her lips. He was hard now, he could feel it in his trousers, straining. Then he felt the cold remains of his cum. He let out an unrecognisable sound of disgust and withdrew his hand. “Perhaps not.” He slapped her thigh. Then his mind wandered to the other one. Hm. She was a bit bloody. The bloke? *Nah*. *That’s weird*. Jon pulled the sheets out from under the mattress and pulled them from the bed using them to help drag her to the floor. Then down the stairs.

—

Jon sat in front of the screen. He’d written down all he needed to and was now reading up on the disposal of bodies in film. He’d tried it his way with the knife and that wankers Youtube video, and he still had faith that would work, but now he had three bodies in the shed and time was getting on. He read that the bodies could be buried pretty much anywhere as long as there was no means of identifying the body. It was likely they would identify it eventually but only after the trail had gone cold. He scanned down the page. Things to removed to stop the body being identified? He found the section. Wallet. Driver’s license. Made sense. Phones. Cool. The finger prints. He stopped reading and re-read that bit. The finger prints. Shit. Okay, continue. The head, the face, the teeth. Fuck.

So … he rested back in his chair. The plan with vic number one was to cut up the body and bury it. Apparently that wasn’t enough. He needed to get rid of identifying features and finger prints.

It was Sunday tomorrow. Technically today. The hardware stores would be open. He’d need a few items for this.

C H A P T E R 7

Jon opened the boot of the car and looked at his haul. The circular saw was a steal. He wasn't sure if he was going to use it, but decided to buy it anyway. He told the girl in Homebasics that he was doing up the house—which was *technically* true—and she'd been really helpful. His plan was to use a saw to get the fingers off. Or hands. And she'd recommended a hacksaw to go through stubborn pipes. Seemed a close enough analogy. It's not like he could tell her why he wanted the thing really. Then there was the face-teeth thing. He'd bought a mallet for that. He could just smash the face in until it was unrecognisable. Break all the teeth, that sort of thing.

And he wanted to get it done quickly, because he had to go to work tomorrow. He closed the boot and went into the house. He was hungry.

—

It was early evening and the shed was lit by the bulb hanging from a chain in the middle of the ceiling. Jon looked at the body on the workbench. He'd picked the young man up and put him back on there, deciding to do him first. He was already naked. Jon had burned his clothes, originally planning on cutting him up into little pieces and putting him out over time with the trash. He looked at the guys withered cock, and wished he hadn't burned *all* of his clothes. He wasn't about to play dress up with him now, though. He picked up the hacksaw and pulled the guys arm out to work with it. He was hard to move now. He'd been dead some time, but he had left him in the shed the whole time and couldn't be sure when the rigor had set in.

He looked at the naked girl. Damn. He should have thought about that before he dragged her dead arse out here. *Lily-Pad*. He had a sudden epiphany. Her name was Lily-Pad. Jon smiled inwardly. At least that was sorted out now.

He turned his attention back to the guy's hand, spreading his fingers as best he could. It was awkward, like working with chicken wings. He brought the hacksaw down just below the first knuckle and dragged the blade back. The skin pulled and tore. It wasn't as clean as he expected, not with a new blade in it.

He muttered some mild expletives and pushed a little harder. It jagged against the flesh, but hit the bone quick enough. Then the hard work started. Jon sawed back and forth for several minutes, seemingly getting nowhere. He tossed the saw down frustrated, and pulled the skin back to see how far he had gotten.

Not very.

He scratched his ear. "Fuck it." Jon looked around the room. "Fine. The easy way." He pushed the saw from the bench to the floor, giving Tribbles a scare, and the animal chonked off in the direction of the door. Jon pulled the extension cord from the floor up onto the bench and opened the box with the circular saw in. "Oh, baby," he said, lifting it out reverently. He tossed the instructions to the side as all good men do, and plugged it in. He took the rubber protection from the blade. *Heh. Rubber.* Then he span the blade up. It vibrated wildly, as he stared into the blades, as they become a blur of silver spinning faster than he could see. He grinned big and wide. "Oh." He elongated the O sound.

Jon made a maniacal laughing sound as he wielded the circular saw above his head. Then he brought it down on the fingers, carelessly, but making sure to lop off more than one. Three fingers—the pinky, ring, and middle—pinged from the corpse, bouncing like jelly beans from the bench to the floor. The saw whined as it dug into the workbench. "Shit," Jon muttered, taking his finger from the trigger. He wiggled the saw free and then took the last two fingers from the hand. This was easier than he thought it was going to be and he might even be able to get the bulk of it finished early enough for him to watch Bake Off.

He switched the hands over and then took the fingers from that one off too. It only took seconds. Excellent. Jon looked at the head. Okay. Lop the head off and … then what? The fingers are easy – they're going in the incinerator out the back with the autumn leaves, and then when it's all cleaned out the bones will get scattered or buried or something. It doesn't really matter what. But the head? He *could* burn the flesh off. There would be a lot of it though. Probably smell something rank, too. And then there would be the skulls to get rid of.

Jon rested his fingers on his chin. He could keep them on the mantle in the living room. Everybody who came around would naturally assume that they were ornamental, plastic or plastercast. *Oh yes*, he would say, *they cost*

an arm and a leg but they're so *lifelike*. He dismissed the idea as being pretty fucking macabre. So maybe the heads should stay attached?

Jon looked at the guys face. He pulled his lips down and looked at his teeth. Dental records. They would all have to go. His eyes drifted up to the face. And the features. He shuddered and picked up the mallet. He took a deep breath and raised it up, and then dropped it down slowly to line up the blow. Then up again. Then he closed his eyes. He brought the mallet down hard. There was a thud. A little crunching. He opened his eyes and looked. The guys face was dented, for lack of a better word. One of his eyes had caved in below the eyelid, leaving the dome of the eye concaved, but concealed beneath the skin. Jon was glad he couldn't see that. It was probably all mushy.

But the face wasn't broken, as such. Still recognisable, probably, to a loved one. Jon figured this guy had a mother or something.

He brought the mallet back up. He had to be brave and keep his eyes on the prize, and get some meaty hits in, in order to take out the teeth. He brought the mallet down again. Still no real, appreciable damage. "For fuck's sake." He started to get angry. He brought the mallet up again and then down. Harder. And again. And again. Forth times a charm. The jaw seemed to cave in and shatter, the teeth cracking and breaking. The nose was a mess and the eye sockets caved.

Jon looked at his handiwork. It was impressive. He wretched, swallowing back the bile. "Jesus Christ," he said, pushing the body off the work bench. He looked down at the girl, Lily-Pad. At least she was pretty to look at. For now.

He dragged her up onto the workbench, surprised at how hard to manipulate corpses were. He laid her fingers out and got the saw. Her fingers curled slightly after he let her go, what with the rigor not setting in properly yet. He swore under his breath at himself again for letting that one go. He started the saw and jammed it down onto her fingers. The rigor mortis *really* hadn't set in properly. Blood geysered from the fingers, catching the blade spinning at yadda-yadda times per second—Jon instantly regretted not reading the box properly—spraying in a *circular* pinwheel fashion around the room. It painted a straight line up Jon, across the ceiling and down the far wall instantly. He released the trigger and let it run to a stop, before looking in distain at the shield that is designed to stop sawdust

spraying everywhere, still in the bottom of the box with the instructions. He sighed. *Too late now*. Then he changed to the other hand.

He didn't fare much better with the mallet and the face, to be honest.

C H A P T E R 8

Jon turned the engine off and the car rumbled to a stop. It was late now and nearing midnight. The woodland on the outside of Birchingate wasn't particularly thick, or dense. But it was black as oil out there and just about vast enough that Jon was confident that he could make three bodies disappear for a few days. Hopefully a couple of weeks. The longer, the better, he supposed. He had driven up the short track that led through the centre of the woods and to what the dog walkers would have called the drop off area. It was in actual fact a man-made clearing covered in mud.

Jon got out the car and slung the body of Lily-Pad over his shoulder, finding that this was by far the easiest way to carry a corpse. The whole 'over the threshold' bride carry was impractical and a fireman's lift was the next best thing. He carried her into the woods, away from the tracks where walkers had beaten the brush down with their feet, and out to the base of a tree with furs growing around it. They were dense enough that Jon was happy that he was going to bury the bodies away from the thoroughfare. He tipped her naked body onto the damp ferns and returned to the car to get the next one. He left the guy for last. Heavy fucker, he was.

By the time Jon had all three bodies over to the same place, along with a shovel, he was exhausted. He looked at the three of them and the small space he'd cleared of bushes. "Right," he said. "Better get this done." He started digging. The soil was soft.

So was he, apparently.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he huffed after about thirty minutes. He looked at the hole. It was nowhere near as big as TV would have you believe could be dug in that time. Those boys in Supernatural could dig up a grave in like an hour. Jon looked at his pitiful hole. This was going to take all night. He looked wistfully into the air, thinking of Bake Off and got back to work.

When he got home it was three in the morning and he had to be up to leave for the office at eight. It was hardly worth it once he'd showered, but he hit

the sheets hard. It was pleasant. He could still smell Lily-Pad, like she was somehow still with him.

—

The alarm sounded like an alien invasion. Jon opened his eyes and squinted at the time. The clock said *07:30*. He groaned and got up. He didn't even consider having a shower as he'd only just had one. Besides, he'd picked up some of the pheromones from the bed and was happy to smell like that. He opened the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of trousers, pulled them on and went downstairs.

Sitting in the middle of the table in the kitchen was the blue carrier bag —the one you get from the offy when you buy some cheap-as lager—that had twenty-nine fingers and thumbs in it. One of them had plopped under the workbench and Jon had yet to retrieve it. Along with both the girls phones, Lily-Pad's clothes and her wallet with her ID in, and the other girls —Emma, apparently—which he had retrieved from the inside pocket of her jacket. All there to be burned tonight in the incinerator. Jon already knew that he wasn't going to feel like it. He ached all over from the exertion of the weekend. The fighting. Fucking. Digging. Sawing. It was all hard work.

But that was for tonight.

He made a coffee, idling poking around in the bag as he drank it, fingering the items like they were delicate collectables. Finishing his coffee he left for work.

He noticed on the way in that the car smelled funny. Like sweat.

—

Jon sat in his office. It was tea break, and no one ever came to see him at that time, so he was flicking through Amazon looking for a decent film to rent this weekend. He wanted a horror film, but one with a shit ton of T and A. It helped him think.

Suddenly his door opened and in burst Dave, visibly flustered. "Shit, man," he said. "I've been trying to get in here to see you all morning."

Jon shrugged. "What's up?"

"Those girls." Dave leaned against the desk, visibly shook. "On Friday," he said.

"What about them?" Jon leaned back in his chair looking as casual as he could.

"Did you take them home? I can't remember shit after we left the pub."

Jon leaned further back, putting his hands behind his head. He put the shittingest grin he could on his face. "Nah, mate, they came back to mine as you weren't up for it."

The look on Dave's face changed slightly, into confusion, perhaps. "Do you know how to get hold of them?"

Jon widened his grin. "How do you know they're not still tied to my bed?"

"Seriously, you fuck." Dave frowned. "One of them nicked my fucking wallet."

"What?" Jon's smile slid from his face.

"I only noticed it was missing yesterday—I was hungover as fuck on Saturday—and after thinking about it, the last time I remember seeing it was when those two tarts came over on Friday."

Fuck. "You were blathered, mate. You probably dropped it down the back of the fridge or something."

"No. There was something up there." Dave scratched his face. "You saw the way she was all up on me. Now I'm no Brad Pitt—"

You can say that again.

"—but even I have to usually work a little."

That made sense. Well, more sense than Dave having great pickup lines.

"I reckon they were on the rob." He stared at Jon. "Well?"

"Okay," Jon paused, thinking. He had to say something to get rid of Dave. Then he could work out a course of action. *No Dave, of course they didn't rob you. They came back to my place and murdered the pair of them*. That wouldn't work. "I'll tell you what. I've Lily-Pad's number at home. I'll give her a call when I get in tonight, and see if I can smooth all this out."

"Yeah." Dave seemed to relax a little. "Yeah, okay then." He took a step back towards the door. Then he said, "You look terrible."

Jon closed his eyes for a second. He knew he looked terrible, but didn't need reminding. "Busy weekend," he said. He opened his eyes and gave Dave a bleary wink.

"Jammy shit."

Jon raised his eyebrows and turned in his chair, folding his hands back behind his head again. "Yes, indeed."

Dave shook his head and left.

Jon removed his hands from behind his head and held his face. "Fuuuuuuuuck." Of course, it had to have been Emma, or Ems, or what the fuck ever she wanted to be called, didn't it? If it had been Lily-Pad, then wherever she had hidden the missing wallet it wouldn't be with her—unless she stuck it up her arse. Then Jon remembered the last thing they were doing. Nope. She couldn't have even hidden it up there. Ems was still clothed when he buried her. It wasn't that Jon gave two shits about the wallet in all fairness. He'd have happily played off the fact that Dave had lost the wallet and the two girls had disappeared into the night like the thieving whores they were.

Except at some point, someone was going to dig the bitches up and find a piece of incriminating evidence in there that pointed directly at Dave, and indirectly at him. *Fuck*.

So that meant he could only do one thing.

C H A P T E R 9

Jon sat at the keyboard, one eye on the time. It was nearly midnight and he was struggling to keep his eyes open. He had just finished the chapter about digging holes and was wondering if he could write a chapter about getting a proper night's sleep. He closed his eyes and thought of the research before snapping them open again as he felt himself drifting off.

He picked up his phone and jammed it in his pocket. He'd already had four missed calls from Dave, probably asking about his wallet. He would have to wait until morning. Jon went downstairs and picked up the shovel from by the front door and went and started the car. He sat there for a moment composing himself. *Maybe he should call in sick tomorrow?* He shook his head and pulled out onto the road.

The drive from Jon's to the woodland was no more than a twenty minute jaunt. Out of his old farm house and hook a left through the village that sat next to the long abandoned airport. Shame about that old place. Across the village and out between the fields. It was close to the towns, but drove like an old country lane. It was easy to drive too fast. The fields were flat, and the road narrow, but you could see another car coming from miles.

So Jon happily drove too fast.

He just wanted this over.

The raised grasses edging the fields whipped by lit only by the lights of the car. Anything beyond them was as black as the goo within the eyeball. Jon shuddered. His mind elsewhere, he was now thinking about the goo in an eyeball. He needed to write that in somewhere. No sense in seeing it and not taking advantage.

There a flash of yellow in front of the car.

Something in the lights.

Jon didn't have time to swerve, and the whole car lurched forward, but it didn't stop moving. He yanked the wheel left, then right, trying to keep it on the road. He slammed his foot down on the brakes and the car skidded to a stop. He breathed hard staring out into the night. There was nothing out there. Not that he could see.

He opened the door and looked out, both behind him into the darkness and in front, lit by the headlights of the car. Something seemed off with the headlights. Maybe he'd hit an animal and it had whacked one of the lights off. He got out and checked to make sure nothing was coming. He didn't particularly want to get hit by a passing car. Someone maybe driving too hard and not paying attention. Jon went to the front of the car. He could see before he came round that there was a dent in the centre of the front. The bonnet was hooked up in the middle. "Shit." The last thing he needed was to have pay some wrench swinger to fix it. He rounded the car and stared at the front. The radiator was caved in—that was what had bent the bonnet up—and attached to the car was … well, a person. Jon couldn't tell who, or what sort of person. They were caught in the grill of the radiator, and had been dragged along for a few metres. They were wearing a yellow rain mac, and it looked like the car had ploughed into them knocking them under, instead of over, the car. They'd got their arm caught on the grill and the car had sucked them under and dragged them along. "Hello?" Jon called. There was no response. He looked around. Still no one coming.

He reached down and touched the body. "Hello?" he said again, grabbing the part of the arm that protruded from the grill and shaking it. "You okay?" Jon pulled on the arm to release it from the grill and it came away covered in lacerations, blood running freely from it. He let it drop to the ground and stood back. He sighed. They were dead weren't they? This wasn't turning out to be his week.

Jon bent down and grabbed the exposed arm and pulled them from under the car. The young girl's eyes stared lifeless into the sky. She might have been a teenager, barely that, it was hard to tell under the lights of the car. "What the fuck are you doing out here?" Jon shouted. To be honest she was still in pretty good condition. He laughed at the thought. *She's not a collectible*. Crouching down, Jon got in close. "What to do with you." He looked out into the blackness. He couldn't risk leaving her there. Not with the damage to the car and everything. He pulled her up to sitting and went in to pick her up before noticing that the entirety of the back of her body was gone. The back of the girls skull was shattered, the brain exposed, and some strange thick gloop was flopping around the wound like a crème caramel. The back of her clothes were gone and the skin, and the flesh, leaving the spine exposed. There was nothing left of her butt cheeks, and jeans torn to shreds.

“Huh,” Jon said, then gagged, throwing up dinner. He put his hands up without thinking, catching the vomit, before releasing it to drop onto the road. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” He dragged the girl by the arms to the boot of the car and opened it. It still smelt from the other day, so what harm would this do? He picked her up getting bits of her on his hands and shoved her into the small space, slamming the lid. He looked at the road behind the car. He couldn’t see anything in the darkness, but there must be a smear of her going back several metres, hidden in the black. Without thinking he wiped his hands down the front of his coat. “Fuck,” he said again, having gotten sticky hot blood, and slimy puke, on more than just his hands. Jon sucked in a long breath and returned to the driver’s seat. He closed his eyes and turned the key.

The car started.

“Thank fuck.” Jon pulled away, driving with more care, onwards to his destination.

C H A P T E R 1 0

It was one in the morning when Jon got to the woods. He sat in the car trying to decide what to do with the girl. He *could* just bury her there with the other three, but he thought he might be leaving *too* much evidence behind. She still had a face and finger prints. If they worked out where she was killed—of which there was plenty of evidence unless it started to rain before morning—then they could start to build a picture, connecting him to the other three. "Right." He had decided. She stays in the car. Jon swung over the car seat and grabbed the shovel from the back seat and left the car, heading over the burial site.

He flicked his way through the tall ferns and found the mound with ease. He looked at his handiwork. Only twenty four hours later and like all artists, he looked at it with distain. He hadn't dug the hole deep enough to start with. When he had dumped the three bodies in such a shallow grave, and thrown sod over them, they had barely been covered. He shook his head and stabbed at the dirt with the shovel knocking clumps off. Lily-Pad was on the top of the three of them. Something had told him that the body would be rotting and covered in maggots, but it wasn't. She was still as beautiful —fuckable even—as she was when he'd buried her. But there no time for that. He shoved her from the pile with the shovel, wondering if that was where it got its name from. Shoving. Emma was underneath. He stabbed the point of the shovel into the earth at his feet and hurriedly started to rummage through her pockets. He *had* already done that once, but he must have missed something.

He patted down her jean pockets. Nothing. *Don't tell me I've done all this for nothing*. He sighed. He had to be sure. Jon started pulling her clothes off. They were damp from the morning frost. Her jacket first. It was like he was undressing a drunk girlfriend with the intention of fucking her lifeless body. Except without the fucking this time. He pulled her tee shirt over her head. Her small tits were still covered by a cheap as shit bra, but he didn't bother. There was clearly nothing *there* worth investigating. He undid her belt and pulled at her jeans. "Fucking skinny jeans," he muttered, trying to pull them down. They were hard enough to get off a living person, let alone someone who had been dead for two days. He ended up rolling the

fucking things down. Nothing. Jon rolled her over. There, in the back of her panties was a lump. "*Really?*" He pulled them down and Dave's wallet slopped out, damp from mildew. "Really?" he said again. "Is this why you didn't want to join in with us fucking?" He picked up the wallet and pulled it open. "There's only twenty quid in here. I would have paid you that to …" He stamped his foot into Lily-Pad's chest as she lay on the floor. "Fucker." He closed Dave's wallet and slipped it into his back pocket, before dragging the three bodies back into a shit pile and shovelling the wet dirt back over the top. "Maybe I should give up writing and become a painter," he said.

—

Jon opened the boot of the car and slung the shovel on top of the dead girl. The interior light came on and Jon could see her blood pooling in the carpet. He shook his head and slammed the boot shut, before getting in and driving home.

He went the same way back as he had come. Stay in the shadows, he thought. The car was banged up and covered in bits of dead girl. He was covered in blood. He had someone else's wallet on him. Was driving someone else's car. It all stacked up. Best not get pulled for anything.

As he drove back through the fields, he recounted what Emma's body was like in his head. He didn't want to forget. He had to make notes when he got home. His thoughts wandered to the girl in the boot. He shouldn't waste her either. She had to have some benefit before he decided how to dispose of the body.

He drove through the village and there seemed to be a few too many people out for this time of night. There were several men of various ages, and they all had torches. Weird, as the road through the village was lit by street lights. Jon kept driving and didn't look at any of them for fear of catching their eye. They were out looking for something … or someone … and he had someone with him.

He tried to sink into the seat and look innocent.

As he left the village a police car came in the other direction. It didn't have its lights going, it could have had a thousand reasons to be there, but

he knew. He knew everyone was looking for a girl. Maybe one that had run away. Maybe out between the fields, in the dark.

Jon gripped the steering wheel harder and turned back towards his house. He felt better leaving the road and getting into his own driveway. As soon as the rear wheels left the road, he flipped the headlights off and drove up to the house in blackness.

As the engine stopped, Jon got out. He stood at the rear of the car and his hand hovered over the handle to the boot. He let his hand drop, and he turned back to the house. Going in, he went into the kitchen and got a half done bottle of Jack Daniels from under the sink.

He sat at the kitchen table and poured a couple of inches into a coffee mug, and sipped it, staring at the bag of fingers on the table. He rested the mug against his forehead, still burning from the exertion. It was nearly three in the morning and Jon slugged back the mug and drained it, the hot sticky liquid burning as it sunk down his throat.

Yes. He was definitely going to call in sick.

Jon crept up the stairs without turning the light on and headed straight into the bedroom. He flopped on the bed and sunk into sleep.

Jon opened his eyes wide. *Shit*. He threw himself up and ran out of the door. It was already light outside. He hit the hallway and flung the front door open. Running over to the car he fumbled with the keys and jumped into the driver's seat. He pulled the car around the back of the house, and turned the engine off.

He'd been dreaming about the girl and the police, and had awoken with the sudden realisation that if the police started going door-to-door, which wasn't unreasonable as he was only a couple of miles out, they might be a little suspect of the car in front of the house that was dented and covered in blood.

Jon surveyed the damage to the car in the daylight. The bumper was fucked, as was the radiator grill. He had no idea if the rad itself was fubar. The bonnet needed straightening.

The car was now parked on the mud behind the kitchen. Jon unwound the hose pipe attached to the tap at the side of the house and laid it down in the dirt. He went over to the side of the shed and got the small incinerator—the one he usually used for leaves—and brought it out on the grass near the house. He opened the lid. It was empty. Jon pulled his phone from his pocket. It was nearly seven. He started typing a text. *Have your wallet. She said she picked it up off the bar because you left it, and forgot.* He paused, and then deleted it without sending it. He dialled the office and it rung a couple of times before the answerphone kicked in. Jon left a polite message about his bowel movements being unpredictable, and that he hoped to be in tomorrow. He'd get in the shit for leaving a message on the answerphone instead of talking to his supervisor, but he'd deal with that at the time.

Jon returned to the house and came back with a handful of newspaper for kindling. He stuffed some of it into the bottom of the incinerator, and lit it, before chucking on a few handfuls of leaves. Then he turned the hose on and started to wash down the car. The bits of flesh and blood that had remained fresh enough turned pink and then slid and slipped from the bodywork. Other bits were more stubborn, and he had to scratch at the blood and goo that refused to budge with his fingernail.

Then he went and got the bag from the kitchen, chucking the finger collection, the ID, and the clothes into the burning leaf pile, and replaced the lid of the incinerator, allowing it to reach temperature. He opened the boot and dragged the girl out. She'd leaked an impressive amount of fluid for someone so small over the carpet. He took her in to the workshop and dumped her on the workbench before heading back out and washing out the boot. It was harder than the outside, and Jon ended up ripping out the carpet piece and burning it.

When the car was clean enough to be driven without looking like something from a John Carpenter film, he turned the hose off and headed back into the workshop.

He flipped the girl over and examined the backside of her body—that which was without skin. He started at the head. The skull shattered, there was jagged bone shards protruding from the brain, and dirty breaks in the skull. He poked the brain. It was smooth, but had a firmness like a shit panna cotta to it. He smelled it. It had a light whiff of a butchers shop first thing in the morning. He moved down to the spine. The flesh was torn, and

ground off in places from the road. The yellow mac the girl was wearing was shredded. She looked like she'd been in a motorbike accident. He felt her backbone. It was supposed to be smooth, he thought, but it had edges where bits of the bone had been chipped from the rest of it and gravel and grit dug in to places it shouldn't have been, giving the girls flesh an alien feel to it. He noted how cold and slimy he found it. He'd never held a snake, but he thought that this was what a snake would feel like.

He turned the girl back over and looked into her face. She was pretty. Still. In the cold light of day he guessed that she couldn't be more than ten years old. He pushed her eyes open. She had beautiful hazel eyes. Blond hair. Her eyebrows were so light you could barely see them against the softness of her skin.

Jon put his middle finger against her eyeball and pushed very gently feeling how much pressure it would take before flexing under his touch. Not a lot, surprisingly. He pushed harder, and the ball split, his finger digging down deep into the socket. The clear, cold, vitreous fluid spunked upwards onto the back of his hand. Jon made a distasteful grunting. He sniffed her again. She still didn't smell of anything much. Just *butchery*. She probably hadn't been dead long enough. He shrugged, going over to the wall and pulling down a tarp, before tossing it over the body. He left the workshop and returned to the house for a well-earned shower.

C H A P T E R 1 1

Jon sat at the keyboard describing every colour and texture of brain matter.

This was great material.

His serial killer, Gerald, he'd named him—it wasn't set in stone—, had just wrapped a chain around a young woman's head like he was winding a ball of string and then started up a motor that had lifted her by the chain from the ground. The chain had only lifted her so far, and then her skin had given out and she'd fallen back to the ground without any skin on her head. When she hit the ground her head cracked open and her brains spilled out.

Jon sat back and re-read the section. He nodded as he read along, approvingly.

His phone went again. Another call.

It was lunch time at work. "Fucking Dave," he muttered. He ignored it again, and turned back to his notes. He had a good amount of research done for a lot of the book now. Sure, he'd had to change a couple of the kills to fit in with his wealth of personal experience with murder, but that was fine. He'd plotted out a section where Gerald had accidently strangled some hooker. It was falling into place.

The only problem was the grand finale. There needed to be some great finish, and he had yet to plan that.

The front doorbell stole him from his thoughts. He minimised his document and stood. It was time for something to eat, and maybe a couple of hours sleep. He reached the bottom of the stairs and opened the front door.

There was a man standing there. He looked about as enthused to be there as Jon was to be away from the keyboard. He was wearing a raincoat, beige, that didn't fit well enough, and underneath Jon could see a suit that looked like he hadn't changed in a month.

"Oh," Jon said. "You're not the postie."

The man frowned and shook his head. "No, Mister …?" He let the question hang.

Jon had heard about these scammers at the front door. They get your name and before you know it, they've emptied your bank accounts. "You are?" he countered.

The man fished in his pocket and brought out some ID. "DC Richard Strong," he said.

Jon gawped. *No way. What a coincidence*. "Detective Constable Rick Strong." he said.

The officer frowned at him. "Richard," he corrected.

Oh shit. I really have blurred the lines of reality. My shit hot copper has come to life. He swallowed. *And is here, possibly investigating me*. Jon blinked at the man. *Say something before he thinks you're a retard*. "Hello, Stronglaw—Strong. Detective. What can I do for you?" *Great. Pulled that off flawlessly.*

"We're looking for a girl, Mr….?"

"Levenson." Jon stuck his hand out. "Jon Levenson."

Strong was holding a clipboard. He turned it and showed it to Jon. The little girl in his workshop was there in a school picture. She was all smiles, excited to have her picture taken, wearing some expensive looking dungarees. "Amy Cutter," he said. "Missing since late yesterday. Have you seen her?"

Jon frowned and reached out, touching the edge of the clipboard. "No," he answered. "What happened?"

"Family dispute. Nothing to worry about. She's probably fallen asleep in a barn somewhere." He looked out to the side of the house. "Speaking of, do you have outbuildings? Mind if I check them?"

"Actually." *Think*. "I've been out burning rubbish this morning. There's nothing back there, I can assure you." He smiled.

Strong nodded. "Okay, well, if you see anything, please can you call one-oh-one, and let us know."

"Will do." Jon gestured to the clipboard. "I hope you find her."

"Oh, we will."

Jon watched as Strong left. He walked down to the road where a squad car was waiting. He gave a little wave as Strong looked back. It bugged him. Just that look. Like he didn't believe him or trust him or something.

He pushed the door closed and went to the kitchen. Jon made a sandwich and thought.

He needed a cracking ending.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Monday night. Jon had so far evaded every one of Dave's fucking annoying phone calls where he expected him to bitch incessantly about how he couldn't go out without his wallet and how he was stuck at home watching TV on his own. He was likely to be losing his shit over his wallet by now. That was fine, but Jon didn't need to hear it. He was sitting in Dave's car, the engine idling, waiting. He'd plotted the end of the book now, and Gerald was being a bit of a sadist. It was where Stronglaw had finally caught up with him. The book's climax.

So Jon just needed to find out those last few details.

After he'd had his sandwich at lunchtime he'd gone down to the local shopping centre and picked up one of those voice recorders. He initially thought it might be helpful when he wanted to make notes of things on the go. Then he realised using a voice recorder while he walked down the street would have probably made him look like a right twat. *Then* he realised he could use it to get other people's feelings. He'd taken a chance and paid for it with Dave's card, hoping that he hadn't reported his wallet missing yet with the bank. He hadn't.

Perfect.

Jon watched the club start to empty. He was on the outskirts of the town. Out where the music played louder without interruption. Where the people coming out of the club at midnight didn't bother wholesome family types.

And Monday night was Ladies Night at Fifth Avenue Night Club.

The problem, of course, with having a ladies night event at a club on a Monday was that there was always a risk that no one would attend. Now some of the ladies attending would be out with the girls taking advantage of the cheap drinks. There would be some looking to hook up with some cheap Lothario who couldn't afford the big bucks of a Friday night. Some would just be down here for something to do.

As the club emptied, you could tell which was which. There were the hook-ups. They were obvious. The guys were sober, half carrying their victims out to the cars they had waiting. The Romeo's were still sober

enough to drive, and perform, whatever, and the ladies had been plied with enough cheap vodka to drop a rhino. The girl's night out bunch came out in groups and started towards their cars with one noticeable designated driver. Poor bitch. Then there were the sad-sacks with nothing else to do but have a cheap night.

There was a few people milling around out the front. A couple of girls —two of them—took the last taxi at the rank. Another woman stood there looking lost. She was on her own. She was just hanging there at the rank.

Jon revved the engine and drove across the road to the rank, and pulled in. He hoped that she was maybe a little pissed. Maybe desperate to get away from the front of the club. Hopefully she wouldn't notice the dent in the front of the car. Hopefully she wouldn't notice that it wasn't a taxi.

He stopped and looked through the window at her, before raising his eyebrows. He tried to look impatient. Like a typical arrogant cabbie. She nodded back, with a look of apology, and opened the back door of the car, getting in. "Rochester Road, please," she said. She sounded three quarters wasted.

Jon nodded, and pulled out, u-turning and driving out to the ring road around the town. "No problem, love. Good night?" He watched her in the mirror.

"Yes. Well, I suppose. Going home alone, aren't I?"

Jon nodded. He was surprised himself, if that was what she was looking for. She was probably a little older than a number of the other sluts out to hook up, but she wasn't bad looking. Jon rode the clutch on the car, and made the engine rev harder than normal, causing the engine to lose some of it's power. "Damn thing," he said, loud enough for the woman to hear, but not speaking to her. He turned into the housing estate they were passing.

"This isn't the way," she said.

"Sorry, love. I'm having a bit of an issue with the carb. I just don't want a problem on the ring road. I know it's a little further this way, but I'll have you home in a jiffy. I won't charge you none extra." He winked at her in the mirror.

She nodded. She looked unsure, but what choice did she have at this point?

Jon turned back out of the estate, crossing out towards the old airport.

She watched out of the window, not paying enough attention to know they were well off track now, or just letting Jon deal with his problematic car. Along the road the streetlights disappeared and the trees came up on both sides of the car, hauling them into darkness. Jon gave her a quick look in the mirror. She was frowning, probably trying to work out where they were, or how this equated to her home.

Jon rode the clutch again and let the power to the engine cut out completely this time. He guided the powerless car noisily to a stop at the side of the road.

"What's the problem?" She sounded anxious. Not angry. Not yet.

Jon thumped the steering wheel. "Hold on." He got out and rounded the back of the car, keeping an eye on her the whole time. She was fumbling in her pockets. Digging around like she was looking for something.

Jon came around to her side of the car, so he was leaning against the boot, holding his phone to his ear. "Yes," he was saying to no one. "The engine cut out. I've got a fare. Can you come and get her?" He leaned down to the window she was sitting by and nodded in the most welcoming and relaxing way he could. He rattled off a few more non-committal words to his non-existent conversation partner and then returned his phone to his pocket. He opened the car door and crouched down next to her. "Won't be long." He thrust his hand out. "My name's Dave."

C H A P T E R 1 3

Jon pulled the unconscious Diane from the car. That's what she had said her name was. Whether that was true or not, he'd find out soon enough. After Jon had shaken her hand, he had taken the cloth that he'd drenched in chloroform behind the car from his pocket and lunged at her. The two of them struggled for a moment, before he'd managed to get the cloth over her face and mouth. He held her tight, expending a not inconsiderable amount of energy in doing so, waiting for the drug to kick in and for her to go limp. He was shagged after a couple of minutes, and starting to bruise where she kept kicking at him. It wasn't working, so he let her go and swung his elbow as hard as he could into the side of her head. It had split the skin around the eye socket, but did it the job, and she slumped down across the back seat of the car. Then he'd taken the car off road to an abandoned old shack he'd found while wandering about looking for inspiration one night.

He wasn't too far from home, to be honest, but it was part of the plan to be around the area.

He pulled Diane by her feet across the dirt and to the shack. When he'd found the place initially, he'd explored. It was in the middle of the day, and he'd felt comfortable there. It was still solid, had a roof with no holes, and a front door that still opened and closed. The windows were unbroken. The track had taken him far enough from the road that cars passing wouldn't be able to see the lights from the place, nor would they be able to hear any of the screaming. Screaming was inevitable.

It was a sweet murder shack.

But it was a shame it was only going to get used once.

He dragged the door open and pulled her in, closing the door behind them. She was starting to loll about, as consciousness was regained. Jon had to work quickly. He pulled her shoes off and chucked them to the side, quickly looking at her attire. A short, but not too revealing dress—probably why she'd failed to score at that club. Next time she should go to Fashionix, Jon thought, she would definitely score there. Then he remembered that she wasn't going to get a *next time*. He ripped the dress off her body, revealing a cheap looking, but matching—classy—bra/pantie set, stockings—tasty—

and not much else. She was grumbling now at the attention his hands gave, and he knew she was about to wake.

Well, he guessed that. Mostly this was new ground.

He laid her hands above her head and tied them with a bungie cord. He pulled the hook attached to the chain through the bungie, and hoisted her up to standing, via the clever little pulley system that Youtube had taught him to make.

There she hung. She was swaying like a corpse of pig. Her head hung limp. Her feet slipping about the floor. When she gained some semblance of reality, she would just about be able to hold her weight on tiptoes.

Not that he intended for her to have the strength. Jon tied a gag around her mouth. He didn't want to keep it on her, but he wanted her to stay quiet while she came round.

He pulled up and sat in a chair facing her, and started to rummage through her clutch for something to read while he waited.

She had her driver's licence in her purse. Diane Rogers. She was—Jon counted on his fingers from her birth year up—thirty-five. He looked at her, hanging there. *Not bad*. He looked at the photo on it and stifled a laugh. Everyone looks silly in their driver's licence photos. He tossed it to the floor and continued through the contents. Nothing much of interest except a handful of rubbers and some cash. A spare pair of panties. He sniffed them. Clean panties. Weird.

Diane screamed under the gag.

"Ah." Jon looked up to her. "You're awake."

She screamed again.

"Okay, okay," he said, trying to muster some warmth in his voice. She looked around wildly, trying, Jon assumed, to gain some understanding of her whereabouts. He approached her, and she tried to kick out at him but couldn't get a purchase on the floor, slipping and sliding around. "You must be cold." He smiled at her. "Now, quiet." She fought against gravity more than anything else. "Okay. Well, let's let you get tuckered out." Jon returned to his seat and watched her.

She flailed around for a few more minutes before stopping. Either she had given up, or she was exhausted.

Jon went back over to her. “Finished?”

She just stared at him.

He could see how angry she was with all this. “If I take this out of your mouth, you won’t scream. Do you understand?” He remained cold, calculating. *Be Gerald*.

She nodded, unsure.

Jon pulled the gag from her mouth and let it drop down, around her neck. “So,” he rummaged in his pocket and pulled out the voice recorder, pressing the red button and pushing up in her face. She tried to withdraw, scared, but couldn’t go anywhere. “How do you feel?” he asked.

She didn’t break eye contact with him. “Fuck you.”

He stopped the recorder and frowned at her. “That’s … unladylike.” He motioned to turn away and then turned back, fast, and punched her in the stomach. She grunted and flopped forward, all her weight falling onto her tied hands. Again, he pressed the button and held the machine by her wheezing mouth. “How do you feel?” She didn’t answer, and Jon poked her in the face with the recorder. “Oi.”

She muttered something.

“Please can you speak up for the recorder.” He’d heard that once on reruns of *The Bill*.

“Like shit,” she replied.

“Good. Good.” He turned off the recorder and stepped away from her, getting a long look. “You know, you’re not bad looking.”

She looked up at him, struggling to get back to her tiptoes. “What are you going to do to me, Dave?”

Jon frowned at her, impressed that she’d remembered the name he had given. “You’re taking this awfully well.” He waited for a response, but nothing was forthcoming. “Not so talkative. Anyway, I’d like you to partake in my little experiment, which is going to involve you giving open and honest answers about how you feel, into my little recorder here. It will help with the process later.”

“I’ll do anything you want.”

Jon was taken aback. He certainly wasn’t expecting her to be so … compliant. “Okay.”

“Are you going to fuck me, Dave?” she asked.

Jon raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t planned to, but … “I wasn’t—I,” he stumbled over his words.

“Do you want to fuck me, Dave?” she asked.

“Why do you keep using my name?” Jon shook his head. “No, look. You’re moving away from the point.” He walked back over to her and punched her in the gut again, stuffing the recorder in her face. “How do you feel?”

“It hurts, Dave. Please stop punching me.” She spoke quietly, the air knocked from her.

Jon noticed that for all the times she was looking at him, she was also surveying the room, looking for ways out, perhaps, weapons? She was certainly intriguing. “Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Diane,” she said. “I’m just Diane Rogers.” She was making sure to maintain eye contact when she spoke. “Come on, Dave, why don’t you untie me and we can fuck?”

“That’s a trick. And it’s transparent. I’m not fooled by this. You just want me to untie you so you can escape.”

“No,” she said. She looked at the recorder, still just by her mouth. “I want you to fuck my brains out, Dave. Show me how good you are. I want to suck your cock. If that’s what you want me to do. What do you want me to do, Dave? I’ll do it. I won’t even ask why.”

Jon stepped back and looked at her. “What are you jabbering about? No. That’s not why you’re here.” He circled around behind her, and she turned using her toes to move in the same circle as him, following his every move. Behind her was a small, dilapidated table. Her eyes widened when she saw it. Across the top was an array of tools. Mostly stuff that any handyman would have in his arsenal. Jon picked up a long bladed knife—something that looked like it was designed for whacking weeds. Diane tried to pull away, held firm by the rope and hook. She looked up at it, writhing back and forth. Jon walked up to her and roughly spun her around so that she was facing away from him. He slipped the knife under her bra strap and pulled the blade back towards himself, slitting through the material with ease.

Diane froze to the spot.

"I know," Jon said. "You don't know if I'm going to take you up on your offer, or do something much, much worse." He used the blade to cut her panties from her, and let them drop to the floor. "But the fact that you stopped squirming tells me at least that you are afraid of me." He span her around again and put the recorder to her lips. "Tell me."

"I am afraid of you, Dave. You have all the power. I am helpless."

"What are you talking about?" Something screwed up in Jon's gut. It was anger. "Why are you talking to me like we're in some shitty erotic romance? Fuck's sake," he said. His eyes were drawn to her naked breasts. "Right," he said. Jon raised the knife, and even as she tried to pull away from him, he firmly drew the knife against her flesh. Not hard, or deep. But enough to make a cut on her left breast a couple of inches above the nipple.

She let a quiet grunt out, and as she tried to withdraw, she ended up spinning on the hook, around and around.

Jon grabbed her and stopped her. Pushed the recorder up into her face again. "Talk."

"Please, Dave. Don't hurt me." She was crying now. Afraid.

Good.

"I'll do anything you want."

"How do you feel?" he demanded. Jon watched the blood trickle down to her areola and around. Her nipples were hard. "Tell me," he said, breathing heavily. He was excited. He realised he was actually hard in his trousers.

"I'm scared, Dave." She glanced down at the damage that he'd done to her. "I'm scared, and I'm cold. It hurts."

"That's better," he said, smiling. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"What are you going to do to me?" She saw the bulge in his trousers. "You can still fuck me, Dave."

He slashed the other breast, angrily, deeper than the first one. She screamed out for the first time and Jon let her. "Shut the fuck up about that," he said, his mind drawn back to images of him choking out Lily-Pad as he fucked her arse. He didn't mean to. *Hadn't meant to*. But he had. He realised how hard his cock was straining. "Oh my God," he said, turning away from Diane, hiding himself. He smiled. This shit *was* actually turning

him on. He turned back to her. Diane was trying to loosen the ropes that tied her hands together, paying him no attention. He lightly slashed her belly. It wasn't hard enough to go through to the insides, or anything. Just enough to get her attention back. Enough to draw some blood.

She looked at him. Jon could see that she wanted to scream out again but was holding it in.

"I can see what you're doing now. You're trying to humanize yourself. Create some sort of bond between us, so that I won't kill you. Which is neat." He slashed the top of her leg, lightly. "But it isn't working. Because my name's not Dave." He grinned at her. "My name's Gerald."

"Gerald," she said weakly, confused.

Jon smiled. "Gerald," he repeated. Jon placed the recorder down on the table. "Please," he said. "Feel free to share your thoughts at any time."

He placed the knife down on the table and ran his fingers over the other tools he'd bought with him. His hand rested on the mallet. He picked it up and turned back to Diane. She screamed, hard and loud, panicking and flailing, trying to get free. Her breasts bounced from side to side as she did, blood on both. The cuts looked like they had bled very little but she was encouraging what little had come out to run down her, over her nipples. The blood from the cut on her leg had run slowly down towards her shin. Jon raised the mallet and struck it down hard on her knee.

She screamed again and then went limp. She was crying, whining. She was unable to hold her own weight up, her knee sticking out at a strange new angle under the unbroken skin.

"Shut the fuck up," he said. "Unless you're going to say something useful for the tape." Jon turned back to the table and tossed the hammer down. He didn't like it as much as the knife. He picked up the battery drill. He pulled the trigger and the bit went around. He wished he'd brought the whole set with him, but when he was prepping earlier, he'd loaded the drill with a small wood drill bit. Smaller than his finger.

He turned to her. She was looking at him, but she wasn't flailing—the knee had seen to that—she was still crying. *Please*, she was saying, over and over. Jon spun up the drill and thrust it hard into the side of her leg, above the stockings, straight down to the bone. It ground against it, but he couldn't tell if the drill was going into the bone or not. There was too much

blood, and she was squirming. He pulled it out and it caught on her skin tearing it a few inches like an animal wound. She screamed again amid the crying. Jon tossed the drill to the table. “Useless.” He picked the knife back up and turned to her. “Remember this is being recorded,” he said. He grabbed her long black hair and pulled it tight, dragging her head to the side, and then used the blade to hack it off, handful after handful until she was a bedraggled mess, black hair cut and fallen, sticking to the blood on her body. He ran the tip of the knife from her neck down, between her breasts, across her belly and to the hair at the top of her cunt. She stopped moving. They looked into each other’s eyes as they stood there, still.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked quietly.

“A book’s gotta have a climax, right?”

“Then you could have fucked me,” she said.

Jon drew the knife back from her skin and took a step back. He roughly pinched her nipple between his forefinger and middle finger, and pulled it up, slicing the knife below it. Her breast dropped back to her chest and Jon held her nipple in his hand. He tossed it over his shoulder. He wasn’t interested in trophies. All he wanted was the memories. Shame she didn’t speak up for the tape, but it was a good idea.

He placed his fingers under Diane’s chin and raised her slumped head up. She wasn’t moving, unconscious. Probably from the shock. He walked around her looking at her body. He was still hard—harder than he’d ever been. He could feel himself burning in there. He felt like he might cum in his pants at any second. He turned her body roughly so she span on the rope, round and around like a fairground carousel. He started to laugh at the macabre-ness of it. Then he punctured her gut with the knife, stopping the spinning body. He sawed across the flesh, blood spewing from the wound, the warmth covering Jon’s hands as pulled the skin apart and rummaged inside. He clasped long things and round things, sticky things and squicky things, sometimes yanking them out and hacking off the things that attached them to Diane’s body.

“Interesting,” he said.

Jon looked down at the insides and blood that lay on the floor. “Hm.” He placed the knife on the table and picked up the recorder. “The knife,” he said into the machine. “The knife is Gerald’s weapon of choice. Good all-

rounder." Jon wiped his hands down his jeans and pulled the backpack from behind the table, loading the bloody tools he'd brought with him into it. He swung it on his back and pocketed the recorder.

Jon went outside to the car and popped the boot open. He pulled Dave's wallet from his pocket, and tossed it onto the corpse of the little girl that he placed back into the boot. He took the car key from his ring of house keys and dropped it through the window of the front of the car and into the foot well.

Then he left, on foot, sticking to the fields.

He wanted to be on the estate before first light. There was a phone box there. A fucked up one that smelt of piss, but it still worked.

C H A P T E R 1 4

“Emergency. Which Service.”

“Police.”

Click

“Police emergency.”

“Hello, yes. I’ve just been walking down Marston Road in Birchingate, near the old airport and I heard someone screaming from in the trees. A woman.”

“Can you give me the exact location?”

“There’s a hook in the road, near the thirty mile per hour sign. On the left there is a track that goes off into the trees. She was down there, screaming blue murder. She sounded in right trouble.”

“I’ve alerted the local police and they are on their way. Can I take your detail’s please Sir?”

Jon hung up.

C H A P T E R 1 5

Jon sat at the keyboard tapping the J. It was Friday night. Takeaway night. He looked at the clock on the bottom of the screen, and then the empty page. He promised himself that he'd get this chapter written before browsing Just Eat's delicious selection of affordable takeaways. He hadn't managed a word.

The memory of Diane and the child, the two girls whose name's he had forgotten again. That other bloke. They had all faded so quickly.

He pressed play on the voice recorder. *I'm scared, Dave. I'm scared, and I'm cold. It hurts*. She sounded scared, but he couldn't remember what she looked like when she'd said it. It was like he had been drunk and it was all a wash of memory. "Fuck." It was only a few days ago. And now he was stuck on the final chapter, still.

He needed more. Another taste of the feelings. He needed to be reminded. Just once. One more time. But he didn't have a plan. Ugly Cunt Dave had stopped coming into work on Wednesday. No one had seen him since. No word at all. Jon had heard that management had even tried to phone him. No answer. No surprise.

Not to Jon anyway.

He didn't even have a car now. Not one that worked.

"Fuck," he said again.

He tossed the voice recorder into the backpack he had at the side of the chair. In it was a knife. Long bladed. Gerald's weapon of choice.

He smiled and stood, pulling the back up onto his shoulder.

He had time to run up the estate. See what he could find. Still be home for a takeaway.

The End

C A R N I E

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

"God damn it." Sally reached up and caressed the top of her head where it had slammed into the roof of the car. Fucking in a car was easy, but only when you were in the right position. Joel wasn't. He kept fidgeting. It was their first time and if she'd realised that he wasn't going to know what he was doing then she would have suggested the bed or something. "Are you a fucking virgin?" she blurted out. She hadn't meant the words to come out—at least not like that—not with how sensitive *men* were.

Joel stopped moving. At least he'd stopped wriggling. "What?" He uncovered his face with his shirt, where she'd pushed it up to get access to his skin for her nails. Ripe red marks were streaked down his hairless chest.

"Nothing," she muttered, continuing to ride him as best she could.

"What?" he repeated, this time with some vigour.

"Fucking hell." Sally slipped off his cock and dropped down next to him in the driver's seat, leaving his hard-on with gusto, as she pulled her panties back up from her knees. "Can we do this another time?"

Joel just stared at her, his penis hard at attention. He was breathing hard like he was about to cum. "What?" he said … *again*. "I haven't …" his voice drifted off. "Okay." He jammed his cock back into his shorts and then started to force the zip of his jeans up. "What happened?"

"Nothing. I'm just not in the mood." She pulled the seatbelt across her and clicked it into place.

"Fine," he said, turning and looking out the window into the darkness. They were parked on the old motorbike training ground near the abandoned airport just outside of town. There was talk that the airport was going to re-open and that the town would thrive, but no one really believed it. The whole place had long been shrouded in two foot tall grass. No one had been there in forever. And the motorbike ground next to it had been abandoned for even longer. It was where Joel had learned to ride, but that was years ago.

Sally started the engine.

“So what do you want to do?” he asked, trying to make amends for something, but he wasn’t really sure what.

“I’m taking you home,” she said. “Then I’m going to call Mia and see if she wants to go down Fifth for a drink.”

“Oh.” Joel continued to look out the window. He wasn’t really into the club scene—not that she had suggested he was invited. “Don’t you want to come back to my place and try again?”

“No.”

Joel raised his eyebrows and glanced out of the front of the car. The lights spun as Sally gave a u-turn in the dirt and drove back out the gap where the gates used to be, to the small road that ran around the airport. They drove in silence until they reached the main road and joined it via a small roundabout.

Over to the right there were fields, and beyond them, the top of the tower block that edged the housing estate. There were lights in one of the bigger fields. Activity.

Joel pointed over to it, his attention leaving the lack of care his cock had gotten. “What’s that?”

Sally pulled the car off the main road and into the side road to the estate. She drove along, adjacent to the field, slowly enough to see what was going on as it was late enough for there to be little else on the road.

There were people erecting a tent in the centre of the field, surrounded by stalls and rides. A hive of activity. A hundred people.

She pulled over to the side of the road near the entrance to the tower block and to a stop, winding the window down.

There was an eerie quiet over the work going on. The people all bustled without music. There was no chatter or laughter on the air. Sally squinted into the activity. One of the people working saw her. He stopped and stared. He was wearing a dirty white shirt, brown trousers. He had a bowler hat on.

Then he started pointing at her. Just the point. Nothing else.

Sally returned the look. She turned back to Joel who was looking past her to the same guy. “The fuck?” he muttered.

Sally looked around the car, and then tapped Joel’s leg. “Look.”

Out of the entrance to the tower block came a man. He was dressed in a full clown costume. A real John Wayne Gacy mother fucker. Dirty looking. Far more scary than ha-ha-funny.

Sally rested her hand on the gearstick, the engine of the car still idling.

"Think we should go?" Joel said.

Sally just watched.

The clown stared at them for a moment, then he looked over to the guy pointing and nodded. He started towards the car. A slow, deliberate walk, close to a shuffle.

Sally still watched.

He was on the path, on the passenger side of the car. This gave Sally a little confidence that if he did go all fucking psycho on them, at least she should still be able to pull away. He shuffled up to the car and stood outside Joel's window. His white fingered glove knocked three times on the window. *Clunk*. *Clunk*. *Clunk*.

Sally opened the window with the button between the seats sliding it down a few inches.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Joel whispered at her.

"Don't shit yourself, big boy."

The clown rummaged around his clothing, fishing for something, and then withdrew his hand. He thrust it at the gap.

Joel backed away from the opening, crossing the top of his body over onto Sally's seat. She pushed him back. It was paper. A leaflet or something. The clown just held it there, while the longest time ever seemed to pass. "Fucking take it," she said.

Joel nervously reached up and took the paper.

As soon as he did the clown turned away. He walked behind the car, and across the road into the field on the other side, watched by Sally in the mirror. "Well?" she asked.

"It's an ad for the carnival. *The Tostoy Bros*," he read. "*The carnival of a lifetime*. *Featuring the Fear Factory*. *You mustn't miss it*. Opens this Friday, apparently." He folded the leaflet and stuck in on the dashboard.

"We should come," Sally said. "I've never been to a carnival before."

Joel looked out to the field. “Looks like a circus to me.”

“I want to come.”

Joel sighed. “Lucas might like it.”

Sally shook her head. Those two might as well be joined at the fucking hip. “Fine,” she said through gritted teeth. “But I’m bringing Mia.”

C H A P T E R 2

There was a large field to the right of the big Tesco that the carnival itself had set up in, and in the field behind that, they'd set up a rudimentary, if not shit, car park. The evening was relatively cool, but as Sally got out of the car, she looked at the dirt and trodden up field they were parked in, and she hoped it wouldn't rain. The last thing she needed was to get stuck in the mud.

Joel got out of the passenger side and Mia and Lucas got out of the back. "Hope there was no funny business back there," Joel said, lightly punching Lucas's arm.

Mia shot Sally *that* look. The one that said, *if these fucking boys don't grow the fuck up, I will cut and gut them*. Mia had that sort of tongue on her. "Grow up," Sally said, reprimanding Joel. She pointed to the entrance and started towards it, Mia catching her up and the two of them walking side-by-side, the boys giggling and being childish behind them.

There was a gate breaking the fence that ran between the car park and the carnival. They had constructed an archway that looked like it was made of wood, with fairy lights strewn all around it to try and make it more … friendly. It didn't look friendly, it looked cheap. It looked more than a little foreboding. They'd gotten there a little later than Sally had wanted. The thing opened at four in the afternoon—it was a school day, after all—and she'd wanted to get there then.

Joel had said no.

He wanted to get there after dark. *For the atmosphere*, he had claimed, but Sally thought it was probably something more to do with his libido than anything else. Get her in the haunted house or something and then try to access her knickers. But the joke was on him.

She wasn't wearing any.

She was, however, willing to give him one more shot in the sack. Or the backseat. Or whatever.

They joined the queue to the arch. There were about thirty or so people in it. More than she would have wanted, but it seemed to be moving at least. There were mostly people around their age waiting. Groups of twenty-

somethings. Some weirdo looking son of a bitch was running up and down the line cackling some looney bollocks and handing out flyers. He was dressed in some cannibal bullshit outfit, with prosthetic makeup and everything.

Mia pulled in closer to Sally's shoulder. "I thought this was the carnival," she said. "It's not Halloween."

"No." Sally tended to agree. It was a little strange. There were two young-ish women in the line in front of them and she tugged on the arm of the jacket of one of them. "Excuse me," she said. The woman turned to face her. "What is all this?" She waved in the general direction of the commotion being caused by the cannibal. "I thought this was a fun fair?"

The woman nodded. "Don't you use social media?"

Sally shrugged. *Not really. Not since she was fifteen.*

"The Fear Factory," the woman continued. "It's all over Facebook. It's one of the rides?" She looked at her friend for some support. "I don't know … attraction? Anyway. It's a haunted house experience and it's gone viral. This is the only place that has it in the world." She stared at Sally waiting for some recognition. When none came, she continued. "So they pretty much have ditched the kiddy part of it, and turned it into a travelling horror show, if you like."

Fireworks going off somewhere too close to them made Sally jump. She turned her attention back to the woman. "Okay. Thank you." Then she turned around to Joel. "Did you know about this?"

"What?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and looking a little shell-shocked.

"You fucking did." She shoved his shoulder, knocking him back.

"What? You don't have to come into the Fear Factory." He sighed. "Of course I looked it up when I got home. It looks awesome."

Sally shook her head. "You still want in?" she asked Mia.

Mai shrugged. "Why not?" She looked at Lucas. "I suppose *he'll* protect me."

Joel let out a wolf howl, barking at the moon, loud enough that he attracted the attention of the cannibal who pranced over and copied him, mimicking the sound and motion.

Sally let her head drop. It was going to be one of those nights.

C H A P T E R 3

The man at the front of the queue was dressed in a clown costume. It was impressively done, even if Sally did have to admit that herself. He was tall and skinny under the costume. That much was obvious, and the whole look had more of a Pennywise vibe to it than a Ronald McDonald. Not that old Ronnie wasn't fucking terrifying. His face was painted in a way that blended into some grotesque prosthetics that not only made him look like he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards, but was also long dead before it had happened.

"Two?" he asked Sally.

She turned and held her hand out to Joel and Lucas, clapping her fingers into her palm.

They both placed a fiver in her hand and she turned back to the clown handing him over those and another ten for her and Mia. "Four." She smiled at him. "I like your makeup."

He leaned in to her face so that she could smell the stank of tobacco on his breath. And something else. Something rotten. "Don't get too close to the clowns," he said. "They'll cut you up."

There was a pregnant pause.

Then he cackled. "Give me your hand." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into him. Sally let out a short yelp that was about to turn into a scream when he pushed a rubber stamp down hard on the back of her hand. *Fear Factory*. "Good for one night only." He yanked her forward and out of the way and then started on Mia.

Once the four of them had been stamped, they crossed under the arch which was guarded by two of the undead. They looked like they needed to put some weight on and she could have snapped them half—which was probably just good makeup effects. She thought it likely that not only was it an illusion, but they were probably well-trained security.

Sally glanced at Mia who was gawping around the place. There were a number of stalls surrounding the outside of the carnival. They circled the attractions nearer the centre. There was the usual stuff. Sally didn't know—nor care to know—the names of them. There were throwing things, and hot

dogs and burgers. Throw a hoop over a bottle and win a teddy bear. That sort of thing, although the teddy bears were all made up in some ghoulish makeup. There were people selling trinkets and junk. From there the stalls turned to rides. The most basic at first. A carousel. The horses all painted black with blood streaks coming from their eyes. A mechanical bull, again, painted black with blood splatters all over it. Some guy was riding it, badly.

After those there was the central set of attractions. The roller coaster. You had to go up a small flight of steps to the back of a lorry trailer for that one. Then it looked like it rode off into a tent behind it. A set of bumper cars. Blood sprayed out of the front of the cars when they collided. Even from this distance Sally knew that she wasn't going to wreck her clothes riding that thing.

There were other rides and stalls, and in the middle of it all was the Fear Factory. The queue was huge, winding around barriers all going to the front of a marquee. It didn't look impressive. It just had a black sign above the door flap to the large tent. A shoddily constructed wooden arch. Sally wondered if the arch was shoddy, or just made to look shoddy. Perhaps that was giving the makers too much credit?

Sally turned to Joel. "So what is it?" she asked, gesturing towards the marquee.

Joel tipped his head to the side. "Well," he said. "They're a bit cagey about what goes on in there. They say that you have to sign a disclaimer before going in and that you can't take pictures, or talk about it afterwards. I've only seen a few people saying stuff, and it's all very vague. Want to go on it now, or in a bit?" He pointed. "The queue's pretty long at the moment."

Sally shook her head and grabbed Mia's hand. "Later," she replied. "We're going to the Hall of Mirrors." She led Mia away.

"Great," said Joel with dense layers of sarcasm. "We're getting hotdogs, then."

Sally didn't bother looking back. She lent in to Mia, happily following where she was being led. "Bottomless pit, that one. He ate dinner two hours ago." The Hall of Mirrors was in a tent by itself over to the side of the main event. There was no queue. In fact there was little wait time in or at any of the other attractions. Everybody was coming in and farming from the

entrance to the Fear Factory. Maybe if the boys wanted to go in there, then they could queue on their own.

Mia groaned when she saw another distastefully dressed character on the door of the Tent of Mirrors—or whatever it was called.

The two of them walked over to the werewolf. “Not so busy tonight.” Sally beamed at him.

The wolf nodded over to the Fear Factory. “Most people are only coming in for that.” He sounded as annoyed by the Fear Factory’s presence as she was. And quite normal under the well applied, if not tacky, make up.

“You don’t sound scary,” said Mia. She booped his long nose.

“Yeah,” he replied, pulling away from her playfulness. “Well, I ain’t a clown tonight.”

Mia paused. “What is it with the clowns?”

He nodded to the Factory again. “Go in. You’ll find out.” He cackled and barked. “Coming in or what?”

Sally nodded, and all but dragged Mia into the entrance of the Hall of Mirrors.

C H A P T E R 4

The inside of the tent was surprisingly impressive. From the cheap plastic exterior, the mirrors stood directly inside the entrance, channelling them into a single corridor. A maze. They led forward and then hooked off to the right. At least, without entering the corridor, it looked like it went to the right. Sally looked up. She couldn't make out the ceiling. *Clever*, she thought. The mirrors towered upwards over their heads, probably six or seven feet up and then some sort of optical illusion, she supposed, as they just seemed to disappear off into a darkness that ascended far higher than the height of the tent. "They've really spent some money on this," she said.

"I'm glad you're impressed." Mia looked around quickly. "Come on, then." She walked forward with her and Sally still holding hands, and hooked to the right. The corridor between the mirrors only led a few feet and then stopped. With their own reflections bouncing around them a thousand times, it was hard to see where the mirrors started and stopped. "Shit," Mia muttered. She turned back. "We must have missed a turn." She overtook Sally and took the lead going back. Another dead end. "What the fuck?" She looked at Sally.

"The walls must be moving to disorient us."

"Well it's fucking working," Mia barked.

"Calm down. We've only been in here thirty seconds." Sally twisted around, back towards the first dead end. "Look," she said. "See? It's open now."

Mia looked around her and grunted. "Let's get this over with."

The two of them stepped through the new opening, and Mia watched behind them as they went forward, the entry-way created behind them folding in on itself, and becoming a wall, her reflection in it staring back at her. "You're right," she said. Sally had stopped walking and the two of them were now stationary. "What is it?" Mia tugged her arm and came up to her side, following Sally's gaze. The corridor led forward but the mirrors that were there a second ago had turned to glass. They could see beyond them into an open space. Each side of the corridor now had windows that led to

dimly lit rooms. They had hard floors. Empty apart from the spatter of blood on the glass. On the walls. “Jesus.”

“Must be two way mirrors,” said Sally.

“Come on.” Mia went to walk along the corridor when a young man lurched from the darkness on the right, into the light.

He was naked. He dropped to his knees. “Help me,” he said. He was about twenty, twenty-five? He was skinny. Runt-skinny. His ribs were visible through his paper thin skin. His brown hair was ragged. Lanky. Greasy. It hung over his eyes into his face. He held his hands up near his face like he was begging, or protecting his face from a beating. His arms were red with cuts, burns. Some of it was scabbed over, some of it fresh.

“What the fuck?” Mia said. “Are these all horror attractions?”

From behind the young man, another came. He was tall. He was wearing a welders mask and a leather apron. He was big. Really big. Bulky. He had a cattle prod. He lifted it and jammed it hard into the naked man’s back. The guy lunged forward, cracking his head open on the glass of the mirror, hitting it hard enough to flex the side of it that Sally and Mia stood on. Blood slooped out of the cut and onto the glass. The guy dropped to the floor and cradled his head. “Please,” he whimpered. “No more.”

“Fuck,” Mia screamed. “This is a fucking carnival.” She banged on the glass. “Put your cock away you filthy fuck.”

The guy didn’t move, and the welder just stood there. Sally was pretty sure that the mirror was one way and they couldn’t see them. At least, they were pretending that much. So he wasn’t staring at them. *Probably*. “I don’t think he can hear us.” Sally kicked the mirror next to the young guy, curled on the floor. “See? No reaction. Good makeup though.” Sally watched the welder. She *felt* like he was watching her. “Come on.” She moved to walk down the corridor of glass when four dogs came from the darkness in the room on the left of the corridor. They charged into the light. Emaciated. They were matted, their fur was missing. They were mangy. They charged the glass and howled at the two women.

“They can clearly fucking see us,” said Mia.

Sally crouched down next to one. “This had better be really good makeup,” she said quietly. The dog’s spine was visible down its back and there were bite marks along its rear legs, possibly self-inflicted. She could

see the fleas bouncing and ticks burrowing, stuck to the creature's bare, furless, skin.

"Come on." Mia pulled her up.

The young man opposite suddenly started banging on the glass. He was looking directly at them. "Help me," he shouted. He banged again, open palmed, leaving streaks of blood on the glass. "Please."

Mia jumped. "Put it away," she shouted at him, waving at his nakedness.

He looked confused.

"I still don't think he can hear us," Sally said, still staring at the dogs. She turned and looked at the welder. He was *definitely* looking at her now. "Let's go." She took Mia's hand and led her forward along the corridor.

As soon as they were a few feet away from the guy and the dogs, the lights behind the glass went out and the walls became mirrors again.

"Let's get out of here," Sally said, pulling Mia along. "I don't like it."

"*You* don't like it? Fuck this fucking shit. I'm with you. Hall of Mirrors my arse."

They turned to the left and then the right. Sally kept looking back. The doors behind them were closing as they went, ensuring they couldn't turn back. Right again. The mirrors were disorienting. They made Sally feel nauseous. At the end of the next corridor they met a T junction. The two of them stopped. "Which way?" Sally asked.

Then the lights went on in front of them. Beyond the glass was a square room, mirrored on every side. Inside was the same emaciated young man. He was on his hands and knees, in the centre of the space, dirty hay covering the floor. He had his head down, his forehead on the floor. They could hear him weeping. On the other side of the room was a single door in the mirrors. It opened and the man leapt up, backing away from the door on his arse. Sliding towards Sally and Mia, staring away from them. At the door. Always the door.

Then the barking came.

"No," the man shouted. "No, *please*."

"Jesus, no." Sally banged on the window.

The man turned. He could hear her now. He looked straight at her. "Help me," he said. "Get me—" He spun around to face the door again. The four dogs came in, through the door. Their heads down, snarling. They had their backs arched. He slammed his back against the glass and slid down. He was crying. "No," he whimpered. The dogs came at him, all at once. They rushed the guy. Two of them clamped their jaws down on his arms as he held them up to protect his face. The other two squirmed into his face. They bit, taking mouths full of his flesh and pulling, yanking it from his face. The man screamed and yelled at first, but silenced quickly, replaced with gurgles and splutters as he choked.

"*No fucking way*." Mia grabbed Sally and pulled her along the corridor to the right, leaving behind the noise of the man being torn to pieces. They rounded the corner and came to another corridor. The mirrors changed again, back to glass. "Nope." Mia pushed forward as Sally glanced back to see the door closing behind them again.

Behind the mirrors this time was a man. It was a heavy set guy. He was only wearing a pair of black trousers. He had a knife in his left hand. Big fucking blade. Machete. He looked, dead eyed, into the glass—probably mirrored on the inside like last time so he could only see himself and not the two of them. He took a handful of his flesh, his flab, in his right hand and pulled it out like he was kneading dough. Then he thrust the blade through it.

"Don't fucking look," Mia said. She put her hand up to shield her eyes from the view of the guy mutilating himself, her other hand still holding Sally's.

But Sally couldn't stop watching. She saw the blade go into his skin. Through it. His hand came away with a fistful of his own bloody flesh. Blood dripped from his gut, cut open, a large open wound weeping pink blood. Not having gone through to his insides, but cutting off the fat. He screamed and dropped the flesh to the floor. Then he took another handful and began cut that away.

Mia reached the end of the corridor and turned right, dragging Sally through the door. The two of them emerged on the other side of the tent facing the queue to the Fear Factory. Mia dropped Sally's hand. "Right." She stormed off, around the tent to the front. Sally wandered to a stop and looked around, dragging the fresh air in, before vomiting all over the grass.

Mia cornered the tent and strode across to the werewolf. He was standing there with a young couple talking to them. They looked young and full of hope. This attraction would likely destroy that. “What the fuck kinda shit is that?” she screamed at the top of her voice, pointing at the tent.

The werewolf looked taken aback, even beneath the mask. He shook his head. “What?” He sounded genuinely surprised.

“In there?” The volume in her voice never dropped. “That …” She struggled for words. “… That shit. Fucking dogs biting people’s faces off?”

“Ugh,” one of the young couple cut in. “Spoilers.”

Mia shook her head. She’d had the wind taken from her sails.

“It’s just a video screen,” the wolf said. He turned his attention to the young couple. “Sorry about this. Go on it.”

The two of them disappeared into the tent and Mia strode over to the wolf. She shoved him hard, knocking him backwards.

“Hey!” he shouted.

“What kinda shit is this place?”

Sally had come up behind Mia and grabbed her arm as she pulled it back to lash out at the wolf getting back up. “Not now,” Sally whispered with some urgency into her ear. She pointed over toward three men who were coming over. Two zombies and a clown. “We’re in trouble.”

Mia turned to the three coming towards them, unperturbed. “There should be warnings or some shit,” she shouted at them.

The two zombies pincered out to the side as Sally watched. She was trying to keep hold of Mia who was squirming like a barrel of snakes. The zombie stood and watched, a respectful distance from Mia and indeed Sally. The clown fronted Mia directly, her finger waving in his face. He leaned forward and whispered, “Shut your cunt face and behave or imma gonna fuck you up.”

Mia stopped talking and just stood there.

Sally grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the clown. “Sorry,” she mumbled. Mia was still silent, incensed by what he had said to the point of being stunned.

“What did he say?” she asked as Sally dragged her away. She seemed more dumbfounded than pissed off.

"Come on," said Sally. "Let's find the boys." She looked over her shoulder back at the clown and the zombies. They were standing there watching them as the wolf joined their side. She looked over towards the food stands and sure enough Joel and Lucas were standing there stuffing dogs down their necks. Sally pulled Mia over to them, continually watching the carnival employees watching them. "You're still eating?" she said when she was close enough.

Joel nodded with his mouth full.

"I will fuck them up," Mia said suddenly, the realisation of what had just happened sinking in.

"No," said Sally. "No, you won't."

"What happened?" asked Lucas, chewing on a large bite of burger.

Sally quickly explained it, all the while holding onto Mia to make sure she didn't rampage back over to the staff.

"Wow." Joel scrunched up the paper that his hot dog came in and tossed it in the general direction of the waste bin. "So we *have* to get into the Fear Factory now. If *that* is what the Hall of fucking Mirrors is like."

Sally shook her head. *Boys*. She pointed over to the queue. "Have you seen that? We'll be here for hours." She nodded towards Mia who she was still holding onto and who wasn't paying her any attention. "I don't think that's a good idea." Mia pulled, trying to free her arm.

"Yeah." Lucas nodded. "She does seem pretty Scrappy Doo."

Mia shook herself free, and rejoined the conversation as if she had never left it. "No. They're right. We need to see in the Fear Factory."

Sally stared at her. "But the queue …" she muttered. She had no desire whatsoever to be standing here for the next hour waiting to get into something she didn't want to see. "I've already puked."

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "Ick."

"No," said Mia. "I've got an idea. One that will sate all our desires."

Sally didn't like the sound of that.

C H A P T E R 5

Mia led the four of them as they skirted around the outside of the carnival, hanging around the stalls on the very edge of it. They rounded the field and ended up near the boundary fence, with the back of the Fear Factory facing them. There was very little activity around there, what with the carnies realising that the Factory was now the main attraction and trying to pack their stalls all around the queues.

"What the fuck are we doing around here?" Joel asked. "It's getting cold. And it's getting later. If we don't get in the queue soon then we'll miss it. It's only here for tonight."

"We're not queuing," Mia said. "Come on." She gave a quick look around and then hurried over to the tent. She dropped in behind it and waited for the other three of them to join her. She waved them over urgently. "Come *on*."

"Yes," Joel said. "I like it."

"No." Sally shook her head. "No. No. No. *No*."

"Yes," Mia countered. Her mind made up. She crouched down and pulled the tent away from the grass. Without saying a word Joel dropped down and rolled under, followed by Lucas. Mia looked at Sally. "I want to see," Mia said. "I—" she stopped herself. "Are you coming or not?"

Sally shrugged. "Not doing myself any favours by staying out here, I suppose." She dropped to her knees and crawled under the material, followed by Mia.

—

Inside the Fear Factory, the four of them grouped behind a stack of crates piled up in the corner. They'd come out, not in the attraction itself, but behind the scenes. "Where are we heading?" Joel asked, not much above a whisper.

Mia peeked over the top of the crate. It all looked surprisingly high-tech. "What is this place?" Inside the folds of the tent were rooms made of glass—much like they had seen in the Hall of Mirrors, but the Fear Factory

looked like it was a selection of rooms to traverse, instead of corridors. The rooms were held together with sheets of glass, mirrors, or screens, supported by scaffolding reaching up into the darkness of the ceiling of the tent.

Sally joined her. "It's like the opposite of the mirrors. Why do we keep end up looking into these rooms?"

Mia nudged her and left the cover of the crates. They were in a storage area, and the workers must all have been busy elsewhere. Two rooms in the Factory sided onto the area they were in. Mia approached the glass that looked into the first room. There were three women in there. They looked drunk. Mia waved at them and they didn't make any sort of acknowledgement. "They can't see us," she whispered.

"Just as well," Sally said, joining her.

The three women were standing in the middle of a white room. Sally couldn't tell if the wall that they were looking through was white, or a mirror. No way of knowing from this side. Then a trap door opened in the wall opposite them. The women shrieked and then backed away, unsure. Sally guessed this was the first room they'd been in, so the first room of the Factory. At least, that was how they were behaving.

A … thing crawled out of the trap door. It was a zombie, but it didn't look like the ones outside—the security guards. It looked like something out of The Walking Dead. "Look at that," whispered Sally.

"Woah." Joel gawped at the zombie. "Dude." He patted Lucas on the arm. "How cool?"

"So cool."

Mia looked by Sally to them. "Jesus fuck a duck." She tilted her head to Sally. "What do you see in him?" She smirked.

Sally hadn't taken her eyes from the Zombie. It slithered across the floor on its stomach, pulling itself like its legs didn't work, leaving a gooey, bloody, patchy, snail trail of gore behind it. Its body was bereft of skin, looking like someone had run a cheese grater over a new born baby. The thing's guts were torn open, entrails winding across the floor behind it like the wet tentacles of an Eldritch horror.

"It looks like fucking Frank," said Lucas.

The thing reached for the women and they screamed. The cadaver was flayed, maybe, lumps of its flesh dropped from it, leaving a trail of hunks of gore on the floor. It's eyeballs were black. It was gaunt. It reached out again and the women fumbled away from it. One of them rounded the room.

Sally noticed there were two doors on the other side of the room.

The three of them holding on to each other, hand in hand, rounded the zombie, out of its reach. As they got to the other side of the room the first of the doors opened automatically, and they ran through into the next room. The Zombie slithered around in a circle and pulled itself back through the trap door, with it closing down behind it after it was through.

Sally frowned. "Come on." She hurried along the window to the next room, the second they could see into, and the one the women were in now.

"This is sick." Joel bounced along behind them, excitedly.

"I think it's gross," Mia replied.

They got to the next window and looked through. Again the women were oblivious to their presence.

"Where do you think the second door went?" Sally asked.

Mia shrugged. "I dunno. We'll look in a minute."

The three women stood in the room, the lights flickering on and off like they were in an abandoned hospital in a terrible horror film. The room was furnished this time. There was a bookshelf, brimming with old leather bound books, and an old walnut desk. Behind the desk, a chair sat facing away from the women. There was a tacky *do not* cross barrier cutting across the centre of the room, breaking the illusion, but meaning that the women couldn't get to the desk. The chair spun around as soon as the door behind the women closed. In it sat a man. He was dressed in some nineteen-twenties looking period clothing. He was older, sixties, maybe, and he had a streak of grey hair slicked back on his head. His gauntly thin fingers were steepled in front of his face. "Bring her in," he shouted. One set of doors on the side of the room—but still behind the railing—flung open. Through it a young woman was pushed, followed by two men, both of whom were dressed in the similar period as the man behind the desk. The woman was wearing a slip, and nothing else. She was crying—a helpless damsel.

Mia squinted at the scene as it unfolded. She found it to be unpalatable. It was immediately all too rapey.

The woman dropped to her knees. She was pleading with the man behind the desk to spare her. He said nothing. He just watched. The two men pulled the woman back to stand in front of him, and roughly tore the slip from her, leaving her naked in front of the man, along with the two other men, and the women watching from the other side of the room.

Mia turned her attention to the three of them. They were struggling to process what they were looking at. They were half terrified, and half laughing, but entirely enthralled. She returned her gaze back to the scene.

The naked woman was telling the man behind the desk that he could have anything from her. Anything he wanted. He could fuck her. She *would* fuck him. But still he didn't move. Eventually he looked to the man on the right of the woman, giving a signal by the simplest of nods, and the two men hauled the woman onto the desk. The older man stood. He was saying that she was unclean—dirty—and needed to be cleansed. From nowhere he had a knife. He was holding it up like a sacrificial dagger, with both hands. Then he plunged it into the woman's gut. Blood splattered out, spurting into the air. The woman stopped screaming and flailing, before she lay still.

The three women stood in silence, a look of horror across their faces, as they watched. One of them slowly raised her hand to her mouth.

Then the door to their right, on their side of the barrier, opened.

The three of them shuffled out the room in silence.

None of the actors moved until the doors were closed again, but as soon as they had they moved like an oiled machine. The man cleaned the dagger, and slipped it back into the folds of his clothes. The two men helped the woman from the table, she grabbed the slip that was torn from her and hurried out of the room, while the two men cleaned away the blood from the squib—or whatever they had used—up, just enough so that it was unrecognisable as blood from the other side of the room, before they too left, closing the doors behind them.

"This is really impressive," said Joel who had been silent the whole time, taking in the show just as the women had.

"It's pretty fucking degrading if you ask me," whispered Mia.

Joel shot her a look of distaste. "It's just in good fun you know."

"Tits," she said. "That's all you're interested in."

“What about the other room?” Sally asked, again.

“You want to see more?” Mia shook her head. “I am going to report this place to someone tomorrow.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Someone. Ofsted? Ofcom? Something starting with *Of*.” Mia looked up the scaffolding that was holding the sham labyrinth of rooms together. It ran up the sides of the rooms walls, holding them up. It was boarded like scaffolding up the side of a building. “Come on,” she said. “This way.” Mia went over to the scaffold and started climbing.

“What are you doing?” hissed Sally.

She looked back, already a few feet from the ground. “You wanted to see the other room? Well, what better way than from up here. Maybe we can see what the fuck is going on here.”

“I’m up for it.” Lucas was already following Mia up steel maze work.

“And me.” Joel was right behind him.

Sally sighed. “Right.”

C H A P T E R 6

The four of them sat in the scaffolding overlooking the opening room of the Fear Factory for twenty minutes, watching, before the second door was used. They could see the setup from where they were. The groups were being let into the front of the attraction and into the zombie room. They'd skirt around the zombie, and the first door would open letting them into the room with the desk. As soon as the knife was plunged into the naked woman, the next group of people were let into the zombie room. Whilst they traversed that, the knife room was cleaned up. The whole thing took only moments, yet the skill in the repartition was impressive. Even Mia, who was disgusted by everything she had seen in the last hour, had to admit that it was well executed.

Finally, after six or seven groups—Mia had lost count—had gone through the first door, a lone woman entered the zombie room. She must have decided to enter the attraction on her own. Maybe even attended the carnival alone. As they watched, she skirted around the zombie and the second door opened.

She went through.

The door closed behind her.

The lights came on. The room the woman now stood in was more like the zombie room than the one with the desk. It was bare. The walls looked dull in colour—brownish—at least from as high up as the four of them were. The door on the other side of the room opened and a clown came through. It might have been the one that had threatened Mia earlier, but it was impossible to tell.

The clown closed the door behind him, and turned to face her as he leaned against it. She was shaking her head. The four of them couldn't tell if he was saying something to her as they were too far away to be able to hear what was going on.

"I don't like this place," Mia whispered as she watched.

The clown was nodding nearly as eagerly as the woman protested. Then he pulled a knife from inside his costume. The woman screamed. It was loud enough that they heard it in the scaffolding. The people outside

probably heard it too, but it was all part of the experience, right? The woman turned and tried to get back through the door into the zombie room. It wouldn't open.

"What the fuck?" Mia said.

"It's just part of the show," Lucas replied, without taking his eyes from what was unfolding. "She's just shitting herself."

"Hm." Mia stared, unimpressed.

The woman turned back into the room to face the clown as he approached. He went straight across the room, the knife out and at his side. He held it up to her, threateningly. She screamed again, looking around the room. Then the clown brayed his head in laughter. He faked coming at her, and she stumbled backwards into the door she couldn't escape through. The clown stood over her. She was still standing, but he towered over her as she cowered in front of the door. She agreed to something. He was casually waving the knife from side to side, and she was crying, but her head shakes had turned into head nods.

"This twat's going too far," said Mia. "Look at her. She's shitting it."

The woman got down onto her knees and waited as the clown approached her.

"No way," Mia said.

He walked up to her, keeping the knife held at his side. She reached out and fumbled with his hooped trousers. She unclipped his suspenders and his trousers dropped to his oversized shoes. His cock was flaccid, but she took it into her mouth anyway.

"What are we watching?" asked Lucas. His voice had changed from boyish excitement to confused horror.

"We need to call the police." Mia pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket. She waved it around.

"Do it," said Sally, unable to take her eyes from the scene below.

"I've got no signal."

Sally pulled her phone out. "Me either. What the fuck?"

Lucas pulled his phone out and looked at it too. "No bars," he said. "Remember what I said about you not being able to bring phones in? Take

photos and stuff? Maybe they have a signal jammer running in here to make sure no one live streams any of it."

Mia returned her looked to the clown and the woman. She was full on sucking his cock now, her head bobbing back and forth. But Mia could see she was still crying. He had his head rested back and had one hand squeezing his red nose in time with her giving head. The other still held the knife. There was sudden movement. She pulled back, choking. She was wiping her face and mouth with the back of her hand. He was angry. He bent down in her face waving the knife. He was losing his erection. He'd cum and choked her, but he wasn't satisfied with the result.

Clearly.

He drew the knife back and thrust it hard into her shoulder. The woman screamed.

"Fuck," shouted Mia.

"We need to go," Sally started to get up and work her way back into a position to climb down the scaffold.

The clown pulled the knife out of the woman's shoulder and looked around. Then up. He looked straight into Mia's eyes.

"Fuck," she said again, this time quieter.

The clown punched the bleeding woman hard in the face and knocked her backwards, and then pulled up his ring trousers, holding them in his hand and he bounded back to the door and out, out of sight.

"They're coming," Mia said, getting to her feet. She watched as Sally climbed down, and as soon as she could get a footing on the scaffold, she followed. Lucas and Joel stood on the top of the scaffold watching.

Sally hit the bottom and Mia was only seconds behind, then Lucas was on the poles and Joel close behind.

Mia turned as the clown came in behind them, blocking the exit back to the edge of the tent. He had three zombies with him. Then another two clowns arrived. The first one had the knife, still sticky with the woman's blood, and the other clowns were armed with blades too.

"Fuck," said Mia.

C H A P T E R 7

Mia opened her eyes. She was lying on the floor. Uncomfortable. She tried to move and her neck throbbed, dully. “Hello,” she muttered out of instinct.

“Mia.” It was Sally’s voice.

“What happened?” The last thing Mia remembered was the zombies charging into them. Fucking security. They were fast. They were on the two of them before the boys had made it off the scaffold. Then it all went black.

“They drugged us, I think.”

Mia opened her eyes. “The fuck?” She was in a cage, probably just the right size for a tiger or similarly sized animal to be transported in. Or one of those weird sex cages they used in sado. Which was far worse. Shit. She was also naked. “This keeps getting worse.” She looked across to Sally, in another cage next to her, also naked. Mia rattled the door of her cage.

“Don’t bother.” Joel. “I’ve already tried.”

She looked passed Sally and there was another cage. Joel. Naked. He was beaten, badly. “What happened to you?”

“They wanted to tenderize me before they drugged me. Actually, they did such a good job of it, I didn’t need drugging in the end. So that’s something.”

“What are we doing here?” Without waiting for an answer, she screamed, “*Help!*”

“It’s no good,” said Sally. “I don’t know where we are, but no one can hear us.”

They were in a long room. White. Cold. It was mostly empty. A few bits and pieces, but nothing to determine it as a particular thing. The ceiling was high. Ten feet or more. “Where’s Lucas?” she asked. She turned and sat pulling her knees into her chest, trying to keep warm and cover her modesty as best she could. She also had a sick, vomitus feeling low in her stomach.

“Don’t know. I haven’t seen him since the beating began,” replied Joel.

“Fucking fuck,” Mia muttered. She fingered the lock on the cage. It was a padlock—looked old—but there was no way she was getting it off without a key. She scrabbled around, her arse in the air be damned, trying to see if

there was a way out of the cage apart from the door—loose bars, a hole in the base, anything.

Nothing.

"Don't bother," Sally said quietly. "We're stuck in here."

"What kinda attitude is that?" Mia slammed her open palm against the door of the cage, just as a rumbling sound seemed to engulf the whole room. "What the fuck is that?" Then the room rocked, back and forth just a little.

"What the hell is going on?" Joel called from the third cage.

Mia held onto her cage walls, bracing herself on each side. The room rocked. "We're moving," she said quietly. Louder, "We're in the back of a fucking lorry." She screamed, "Help. We're in here. *Help us!*"

The roar of the truck engulfed the trailer they were traveling in, drowning out her screams.

She slumped back. "No one's going to hear us over that." She looked over to Sally, crying into her hands. "It'll be okay," she said, weakly. She meant it.

She hoped.

C H A P T E R 8

The grind of the truck never stopped for hours. Quickly the rumble and rocking became smooth as they left the fields and headed out onto the roads. Mia tried to work out where they were going by listening. She made the roundabout at the end of the fields, but that was about it. She guessed they'd just taken the roads down to the duel carriageways that led out of town in two directions, and from there the motorway.

There was no way to know how long they had been in there.

They could be anywhere.

Mia asked Joel what time it was when he was locked in here.

He shook his head. "No idea. I blacked out. When I woke up you two were already in there, and the doors haven't opened since."

"The carnival was a one night only thing, right?"

"What difference does that make?" Sally snapped.

"I'm trying to work out when and where we are. One night, right?"

Sally nodded.

"So even if they packed the whole shit show up after close, they wouldn't have moved until first light, right? So we've been driving all day."

"Up the two-four-nine. M2. M25. M1." Joel rattled off a possible route. "Three hours and we're a third of the way to Scotland. Could have gone down past Gatwick, and we'd be in Southampton. M6, nearly to Weston-fucking-Super-Mare."

"Great." Mia slumped back again. There was a rumble. It ran under the front of the trailer and then the back. "What was that?"

"We've just driven over something."

"What?" she asked again.

"Rail line?" answered Joel.

"No," Sally replied. "Too loud for that. Cattle grid?"

"A cattle grid? So, what? Yorkshire?"

"Wales?" said Joel.

“Fucking Wales,” echoed Mia. “Great.” The trailer started to rock back and forth. “We’ve left the road.” The truck drove for another ten minutes or more. “So we haven’t just pulled into a field in the middle of a town then.”

“Wales,” Sally breathed. “We could be anywhere.”

The truck ground to a stop and the engine died. Finally, the trailer was quiet. “Thank fuck for that,” Mia said. She was expecting something to happen, so she braced herself. At any moment the doors of the truck would be flung open and guy dressed as a clown would climb in the back. *Let the games commence*, she thought. Nothing happened.

Seconds turned into minutes. Maybe an hour. They could all hear people outside the vehicle. There was movement and voices. Nothing that they could make out the details of. Other vehicles went by on occasion.

Mia shivered. It was cold. She rubbed her palms up and down her arms trying to move some blood about. In the hours that past, the feeling of sickness had subsided, and much as she didn’t want to admit it, she was hungry.

The lights went out. The trailer was plunged into darkness. “This is it,” she said. She could hear Sally crying again.

The doors to the trailer opened. A man pulled them open, walking one door out and around the side of the truck, and then the other. He was middle-aged. He was wearing a dirty shirt, brown trousers. He had on muddy wellies. Fresh mud, too. His face was red. Looked like he was a drinker. He seemed to be purposefully avoiding eye contact. Mia studied him. She was trying to remember everything. She’d seen it on TV. Mental notes of everything to report to the police.

He walked around the inside of the trailer gathering up a rope that seemed to feed around the interior, holding the cages in place.

“Oi, cunt,” Mia shouted.

He ignored her.

“*Cunt!*” she shouted again.

He looked at her and shook his head quickly, before carrying on with his busy work.

“Fucker,” she said. She looked at Sally who was glowering at her. “What?” she asked.

Don't piss them off, she mouthed back.

"Fuck that," Mia replied out loud. "Oi, fuckface," she said. "Does how polite we are make any difference to what happens next?"

Again, he ignored her and having finished collecting the rope, he wound it around his arm and tossed it to the side of the truck, before jumping down out the back.

Mia could see hills in the distance. There was a cold breeze coming in from the open doors, but the sun shone hard onto the valleys and hills in the distance. It *felt* later in the day. Two men came around the back of the truck and leaned two boards against the opening, creating a ramp, before they climbed in. These two were younger. Twenties maybe. They were built like brick shithouses. They walked without word—and again avoiding eye contact—over to Joel's cage. "What are you doing?" he screamed. Mia could hear more fear in his voice than anything else. "We didn't mean to do anything wrong. We won't say anything." They didn't speak a word to him, or each other. The two of them just dragged the cage across the floor of the truck. They pulled it over to the makeshift ramp and down.

Mia could hear Joel's pleads as he was dragged away from the truck, until his voice faded into the distance.

"Listen to me," she said to Sally.

Sally looked at her. Tears still streaked her face, even though she had stopped crying. She hadn't even spoken when Joel was dragged out.

"You kick and you punch. You hear me?" Mia said. "You fight these motherfuckers every step of the way. Bite them. Spit on them. You don't make it easy."

Sally nodded slowly, unsure.

"You promise me."

Sally nodded a little harder. But only a little.

A couple of minutes later the two men came back and took Sally the same way they had taken Joel. Dragged across the truck and out. But Sally was quiet. She didn't beg. Hopefully she was conserving her energy for when she needed it.

Then they came for Mia.

She didn’t say a word. She let them pull her across the floor of the truck in the cage. She hoped one of them would put their back out. Not that she was heavy. She just kept her knees up in her chest. No sense in advertising anything. She still didn’t know what they wanted. She didn’t know what she was here for.

C H A P T E R 9

It was an open space. There were fields blocked in with stone walls, and beyond, hills and mountain terrain, some woods, forest maybe. It was very picturesque. The truck they had been transported in was parked close to an outbuilding of a barn, a tall farm house stood near. There were the vehicles from the carnival, circled like they were expecting to defend the place. There were caravans dotted around the space. People worked. Clothes hung on lines outside the shallow metal dwellings.

They all ignored the naked woman being dragged in a cage from the back of the lorry. The one with Fear Factory painted on the side.

The two men dragged the cage into the outbuilding, and all Mia did was watch. She was going to get out of this, and she needed to make sure she had everything down. Tell the police. Get the fuckers.

The cage was pulled through an open door into a stone walled room. Mia glanced over to the other two cages—Sally was still crying, and Joel was facing the wall. He was muttering to himself. He looked like he'd shit in the cage. He was probably embarrassed.

They pulled Mia's cage up next to Sally's before they turned and left. Mia was facing the wall where they'd left her. She had purposefully made sure not to crawl about in the cage. She didn't want to waste energy, and she knew that no one here was going to help her. Not as soon as she had been dragged into the view of dozens of people, all of whom ignored her.

For the first time she turned into the room. After they had gone.

She turned to see Lucas for the first time since the tent. He was hanging by his hands. They were bound together and attached to the ceiling. He was naked, the same as the rest of them. His head was hung down on his chest and he wasn't moving.

"Is he …?" Mia muttered, the words drifting off before she could finish them.

"Don't know," said Sally.

"We're fucked." Joel didn't turn to look at Lucas. Presumably he'd already seen him.

"Have you seen anyone else? Anyone like us?" Mia asked.

Neither of them replied.

"Oh fuck," she continued, rubbing her eyes with her fingertips. Her skin was rough. She was dehydrated. Hungry.

Another man came in. She hadn't seen him before. He was older, maybe in his forties. He strode over to the cages and quickly assessed the three of them, before turning around to Lucas. He took Lucas's chin in his hand and raised it up, examining him. He gave a grunt of satisfaction, and went over to the table on the far side of the room. Mia had paid it no attention to that point. It looked like a workbench. This all looked like a workshop.

"Hey," she said.

The man turned. The first time she hadn't been ignored.

"What's going on?" she asked. She tried to maintain some level of civility. It wasn't getting her anywhere screaming and shouting.

"What?" he repeated her question. He shook his head. "It's my understanding that you interfered with something that you shouldn't have. If you'd just lined up with everyone else then you wouldn't be here, now would you, lassie?"

He spoke with a twang in his voice. Irish, she thought, but it could have been Scot. Somewhere up north. She was no good at that sort of thing. "What are you going to do to us?"

"Same thing I do with all the livestock that has gotten out of hand."

Livestock. The word cut through her. Sally started weeping again, making this indecipherable noise under her breath, as she covered her mouth with one hand and her eyes with the other. Joel didn't move.

"That clown mother fucker was raping some woman," Mia said, as if he might just say, *Oh, was he now? Well, best be letting you on your way*. Needless to say, he didn't.

He stopped what he was doing and turned to Mia. "He's been dealt with. No good can come from carrying on like that. But that doesn't change your position though, does it?"

Mia stared into his eyes. Trying to make out what was behind them. He didn't seem like he was someone that could be negotiated with. When she

didn't say anything he turned back to the table. He picked up a huge bladed knife. It looked like something from a takeaway on a Friday night and he started to sharpen it. "You're going to kill us." She didn't even know herself if it was a question or not.

He stopped running the knife over the sharpener, frozen for a second, and then continued without reacting further. A couple of minutes later, he took a phone from his pocket and prodded the screen. It rang, and Mia could only hear one half of the conversation.

"It's Ewan." he said. "Get Tanny to bring me the grinder." A pause. "I'm in the butchery."

Grinder.

Butchery.

Ewan returned the phone to his pocket and picked the blade back up. He looked at Lucas, spinning him on the hook. He seemed to be making some judgements about his body. Who knew what? Ewan raised the knife up at Lucas's naked body and prodded it a couple of times in the chest. "All skin and bone," he said, laughing.

"Oh, God." Joel hit his shoulder against the side of the cage in frustration, still not looking in Lucas' direction.

Ewan held the blade against Lucas's arm pit, flat down on the side of his body and started to saw. He was slicing down the outside of his ribs, a curl of flesh rolling away from the body like one of those elephant leg things in a kebab shop.

The shock—surprise—no one would really ever know what, brought Lucas around. Mia didn't know if he had been drugged, or was unconscious or what, but suddenly he was screaming death. He flailed his legs out and kicked at Ewan, but he was suspended from the floor and couldn't get a purchase on anything. He was wild in the eyes like an animal. Blood let from the wound Ewan had created—a long thin slick cut that stretched from Lucas's shoulder to his hip. The blood ran freely down his legs, flicking off in spits as he writhed around.

"Easy, young man," Ewan teased. He took a step away from Lucas to give him time to wear himself down a little, before stepping back in, close enough for the blade to reach his skin once again. He slid the blade into the crease at Lucas's hip, where it met the top of his leg. Ewan was obviously

practiced, as the blade never met bone. It slipped through Lucas and out the other side, just below his arse cheek.

"Fucking hell," Lucas screamed. He still tried to kick out, but the blade skewered him and blood was gushing.

"Leave him alone," Mia screamed across the room.

Sally had covered her ears and had her eyes firmly closed. She was rocking back and forth like a child that was scared. Maybe she *was* a scared child. Maybe they all were. Joel had also covered his ears, but he still hadn't turned, preferring to look at the wall behind them.

Probably for the best.

The blood ran freely down Lucas's leg, off his foot, and splattered on the floor. His struggles got weaker. Ewan withdrew the blade and let Lucas flail a little, his head lolling, his cries of pain weaker, but still present.

Another man came into the room pulling a trolley with a huge metal meat grinder bolted to it. Tanny. "You wanted this?" He looked at the three of them in the cage. He looked surprised. "Not bringing it through to the kitchens?"

"Aye. I thought I'd give the next ones a show."

Tanny nodded. "Anything I can do?"

"Hold onto this one's leg, with you." Tanny grabbed Lucas's leg—the one that hadn't been cleaved through with the blade—and held it out, almost at right angles. Lucas tried to get free, kick away, anything, but he was too weak to fight. Mia thought that he had probably been drugged to begin with.

Ewan dropped the blade on the table and picked up a hacksaw. Mia wondered what else was on there that they couldn't see from the cages. Ewan nodded at Tanny and brought the saw down on Lucas's leg, just below the ball joint. He looked at Lucas and winked. "You won't feel this for long." Then he drew the saw back while pushing down. Lucas didn't make a sound to start with, he simply made a face like he'd been sucking on a lemon.

Mia screamed.

The teeth of the saw dug into Lucas's flesh and then he screamed. A lake of blood flooded from the cut, as Ewan hacked through the skin, bone,

and then the arteries. Once Lucas had started to bleed out, Mia knew that there was nothing that could be done. She just hoped he would slip away quickly.

Lucas screamed once, and then started to plead. “Please,” he said. “No. I don’t wanna die. I didn’t do nothing to you. I can’t …” His voice was getting weaker. “Please …”

Mia turned away as Lucas stopped fighting.

She listened as the saw blade started to dig into his femur. She could hear Ewan struggle to keep the rhythm going back and forth. He let out some cusses as he struggled, blaming the blood. He even told Tanny to *hold on fucking properly*. The sound of rain filled the room as the rest of Lucas’s blood slopped onto the floor. There was a loud crack and Ewan let out an exhausted, yet triumphant yelp, followed by a wet flopping sound. Mia couldn’t help but peek. It was the same fascination that she had when she was watching a horror film through her fingers and whoever she was with gave out a hiss as they sucked the air in through their teeth, when something beyond disgusting happened.

Ewan had his hands on his knees, bending forward, huffing. Tanny was gone. And Lucas hung limp from the ceiling, his leg on the floor, cleft from his body. Blood still came wetly from the wound, but it was getting slower … and slower.

Apart from the pendulum swing of his body where he had been yanked about, there was no movement from him.

“Right,” Ewan said suddenly. “I know you can all hear me.” He waited for some response. Mia glanced over to the other two. She too was sure that they could both hear him, but they both ignored him, lost in their own little worlds. He dropped the saw and picked up the blade again, then approached the cages. “Hey,” he demanded. “You.” He got no response from either of them, neither even looking in his direction.

“Sally,” Mia hissed. “Joel.” They didn’t respond to her either.

Ewan jabbed the blade through the cage into Joel’s back. It wasn’t hard. Not hard enough to skewer him or anything, but enough to gain his attention. Joel screamed out, more from fear than pain. He crawled away from the blade and cowered in the far corner of the cage. “No.” He was crying now.

“Watch,” Ewan demanded. “You watch.”

“Sally,” Mia barked.

Sally finally opened her blood-shot eyes and looked at Mia.

“You have to watch, or he’ll stab you.”

Sally nodded, weakly.

Ewan was impressed by Mia’s understanding of the situation. “Thank you, girly,” he said. He slid the blade out from Joel’s cage and crouched down facing both Joel and Sally. “You two could take a lesson from your friend here. She could save you some serious pain.” He laughed, but Mia was unsure what at. Now he had the attention of the two of them, he came over to Mia and nodded at her, silently.

He went back over to the trolley, the bench, and Lucas.

Lucas was pale now. Mia had no idea how much of his blood was on the floor, but it was pooling out further and further. If it travelled much further, it was going to reach her cage. Lucas was likely dead now. There was too much blood for him not to be. Then her eyes fell on his severed leg. There was that too.

Ewan put the blade down on the bench and pulled the trolley around to face the cages. “I call this baby, Bertha,” he said. The look on his face was a mix of sadistic taunting, blended with a genuine affection for the item. It was a hulking thing. It was bolted to a hostess trolley. The thing looked like a car engine. It was all grease and black. “Diesel.” He ran his fingers over the thing. It had a funnelled hole in the top of it, and a mesh where the ground meat would come out. The rest of it was just power. “Bones and all,” he whispered, just loud enough for the three of them to be able to hear. He looked up from the machine, his gaze turning from lush to excitement. “Anyhow.” He grinned at Mia. “What was this young bucks name?”

“Lucas,” Mia replied weakly. She saw no reason in hiding the name and pissing the fucker off.

“Like that fella that made Star Wars?” He bent down and picked up Lucas’s leg. “I never did like Star Wars.” He held the leg up to the funnel on the top of the machine. It was too large to fit in. “Fuck,” he said. He tossed the leg down on the work bench and picked up the saw, starting again, to cut it through, just below the knee. He slaved at it, having a hard time. The flesh was chewed away by the teeth of the saw, and the bone screamed and

shrieked as the teeth chipped and hacked away at it, eventually cutting it in two.

Ewan breathed hard. His hands were down on the bench and his head dropped. “I’m getting too old for this.” After he got his breath back, he turned back to Bertha. “Okay, girl.” He flipped a couple of switches on the back of it where Mia couldn’t see. Then he turned some knobs, he seemed to be fondling the machine sexually, more than preparing it to do unspeakable things. Then he tore the rip cord on the motor and Bertha moaned to life. She snarled as she took her first breath and the room filled almost instantly with the acrid smell of burning fuel. It was like being in the back of a detail shop, the stink of ozone and petrol, all mixed together.

Ewan took a bowl from the bottom shelf of the hostess trolley and placed it on the floor beneath the mesh.

He picked up the bottom half of Lucas’s leg, the part with the foot still attached and fed it into the funnel, toes first. Bertha’s tone dropped an octave as she started to chew Lucas’s bones. Mia watched the mesh. It spluttered and spat out some blood first, as bits of Lucas’s flesh tried to catch up with what little blood was coming from the leg.

“It grinds the bones to a pulp, you see,” shouted Ewan over the impenetrably loud Bertha. “That way it can be passed off as reclaimed meat. No one would ever know.” He smiled at Mia. She nodded. He seemed to have taken her under his wing, even a little, and she wasn’t about to not take advantage of anything right now.

She smiled back, and nodded. She tried to look impressed.

The pulp of bone and flesh finally made it through Bertha’s insides and pushed through the mesh. It looked like wet minced pork. Bloody, and stinking. The smell in the room changed and there was a fight for dominance between Bertha’s body smell and Lucas’s. The smell of meat won out, just a little, as the heat of Bertha’s insides seemed to be partially heating the meat.

Ewan let go of the end of the leg and watched Bertha absorb the last of his lower leg, and then spit it out the bottom. He turned the machine off and took a spatula and scraped around Bertha’s anus, flicking the last of Lucas’s pulp into the bowl. He picked the bowl up and brought it over to Mia,

holding it out for her to see. “See?” he asked. “It looks just like cheap pork. We use it to make all of our hot dogs for the fayres.”

Mia held her hand over her mouth and then looked slowly to the side.

Joel was staring in horror at the bowl. He retched. Then he puked. Last night’s hot dog coming up, part digested where he hadn’t chewed it properly.

Ewan laughed and pointed. “You’re a cannibal,” he said. He turned back to Mia. “You wouldn’t catch us eating this shit, but you lot? You pay for it.” He took the bowl and placed it back under Bertha’s arse. He picked up the other half of Lucas’s leg and tossed it up in the air before catching it like it was a hatchet he was showing off with. With the other hand he restarted Bertha and dropped the top of Lucas’s leg in. Bertha started grunting under the stress.

Ewan then turned back to Lucas’s carcass hanging from the ceiling. “Okay,” he muttered, scratching absently at his chin. He reached across to the rope that was holding Lucas up and he untied it. Lucas flopped wetly to the floor as the rest of his leg was chewed up and shat out by Bertha. Ewan rolled him over while the three of them watched. He rubbed his stubble, thinking. He picked up the blade and laid Lucas’s arm out, slicing deftly around the joint and parting it like a butcher taking the wing off a chicken.

Mia looked away. She looked at Sally who was now facing Ewan, but had her eyes fixed firmly on the floor. On the other side of her, Joel was crying. He was watching, too afraid to take his eyes from Ewan, but crying. Mia looked back. Ewan had stopped working and was staring at her. As she looked back he raised the blade and pointed it at her. A warning for looking away.

“You need to see this,” he said. “You kids’ll never learn.” He dropped Lucas’s arm, whole into the grinder. Swapped the bowls over. He placed the bowl full of leg meat on the lower shelf of the trolley, and put an empty one under. “Mayvel likes to have them separate,” he said, shrugging. “No idea why.” Then he parted the other arm from the torso and dropped that into Bertha.

Ewan cut round the flesh on Lucas’s other leg and then swapped the blade out for the saw. He hacked it off there on the floor, kneeling in Lucas’s blood. Then he cut it through at the knee, the same at the other leg.

Swapped bowls again. He was working with some organisation. Clearly not his first rodeo, Mia concluded. He cut through Lucas's neck as the second leg busied Bertha. He used the saw to get through Lucas's spinal cord. He rolled the head across the floor like a ball, towards the cages. Lucas's hair matted in the sticky blood, and it stopped quickly facing the three of them. He looked peaceful—apart from the blood that smeared his face. And that his head had been bowled across the floor. Ewan stood and pointed at Lucas's cock. "Either of you girls want to claim this thing? Sorry, I never asked before. Was this young buck betrothed to either of you young ladies?"

Mia shook her head and Sally muttered a *no*, but she never looked up, more than a glance. Ewan didn't seem to mind. Perhaps he knew that she didn't have the stomach to watch all this. But he turned on Joel. "You," he said, waving the blade in Joel's direction.

Joel scrambled to the back of the cage. "Wh-what?"

"You a fag?" He strode across the floor, stamping through Lucas's blood pool. "You a homo?" He jammed the blade into the cage, between the bars, jabbing the tip into Joel's arm as he held it up to protect his face.

"No. No way." He looked at Sally for support.

"No," Sally said quietly. "Joel's with me."

Ewan withdrew the blade. "Huh." He went across the front of the cages to Mia and crouched down in front of her. "Trying to fix you up with him, were they?" He tapped the length of the blade in his open palm.

Mia nodded silently.

Ewan looked behind him to the gore and grime that he had created portioning Lucas, who was now just a torso, a separate head, and mince. "Well. You don't seem fazed." He laughed. "Maybe he wasn't for you." Ewan stood and returned to the torso, kicking the head to the side of the room. He stood over Lucas's torso and raised the blade swinging it down into his flesh just below the rib cage. He slid it back and forth until he was through to the spine and then he swapped out for the saw again. He cut through it, and then started working on the insides of the body. He had a paring knife—small and sharp—and was working within the cavity. Mia couldn't see doing what, but he burrowed away. Eventually he stopped and reached in, pulling Lucas's insides from him and dropping them onto a tray on the bottom of the trolley. He shot Mia a quick look as he worked. "You

don’t want to eat these bits—not if you don’t know what the carcass has been consuming.” He smiled. “Long story, really.” Then he continued working. Once the upper torso was hollowed out, Lucas’s heart and lungs on the tray, Ewan sawed through his rib cage sides and then back and front quartering it. Then he put the quarters through Bertha. The lower half of the torso was quicker, and only the parting of the hips—too large to go through Bertha’s gape in one go—took any time.

Ewan stood. He loaded the meat onto the lower shelf of the trolley and wiped down Bertha with a hanky he had pulled from his pocket. He was muttering some accolades on her quietly as he worked.

He took his phone out and dialled. “Yes,” he said. “Send in Tanny. I’m done for now.”

C H A P T E R 1 0

After Tanny had come and taken the trolley out of the room, Ewan approached the three of them. He stood over them, blood and gore, bits of Lucas down him and his clothes. He wiped away at the drying blood on his forearms and hands, but it was futile. Nothing was coming off. He was just moving it about. “So there you have it.” It was like he was ending a lecture at uni. “Any questions?” He laughed at the silence and walked to the door. “I’ll be back soon enough,” he said, without looking back.

Mia waited until he had gone. She leaned against the side of the cage and hissed, “We have got to get out of here.”

Sally nodded. “But how?” She looked across the room to the sludge and goo that used to be Lucas. “Poor Lucas.”

“Sally,” Mia said. “Look at me.”

Sally drew her eyes from the blood to Mia.

“Joel,” she called over. “You with me?” She looked at him. He was nodding, but he was still a mess of emotion. “We need to get someone to open one of these cages before Cunt comes back and starts hacking one of us up.”

“How?” Joel asked. He wiped the spit and snot away from his face with his arm. “What do you want *me* to do?”

“I guess we need to make some noise. We need—” There was a noise outside the door. “Ssh,” Mia said.

A young woman came in. She wasn’t any older than the three of them. She was small. Slight. Wearing what looked like a homemade dress, she was dragging a hosepipe in a roll behind her. She had obviously been told not to interact with them. Dropped the reel, the young woman unwound what she needed and turned the hose on, on a hard spray, soaking the floor.

“Hi,” Mia said. She pushed her hand through the bars and gave the girl a little wave.

The girl looked up—a glance—nothing more, and then looked down, averting her eyes in the same way that everyone else had when the three of them had been dragged from the lorry.

Mia slumped. This wouldn't work.

"Hi." Joel had come up to the bars of his cage and drooped his hands through, trying to look cool. Bless him. The young woman still ignored him, although he didn't give up. "Hey," he said. "Pretty lady."

Mia saw a small smile raise on her face, even though she didn't look up. She turned to Joel and waved her hands in encouragement at him, telling him not to give up.

"Excuse me," he insisted. "Beautiful," he said.

She glanced up. Only quickly, but he'd done enough to break her veneer.

"Please," he began. "Help us. Help me. I really need you. I need you to help me. You can, can't you?" She shook her head and focussed on the hose. He was losing her. "Beautiful," he tried again. "Please, come closer and let me see you properly."

She glanced up again. Then out the door. Then back to Joel. She released the trigger on the hose and walked slowly across the room to him. She held the hose in a death grip. She was obviously scared, but Mia wasn't sure of who—them, or the people who had brought them here. She got up close to Joel's cage and looked at him. She didn't say anything. Mia thought that she might be retarded. Or maybe they were all idiots here? It wasn't as if she knew what sort of community they'd been brought to.

"Can you get this off?" Joel was holding the padlock on his cage in his hand. "Then I'll be able to get closer to see you better."

It was working, but Joel was as smooth as sandpaper.

"Please," he continued. He watched her as she looked him down. Her eyes lingered between his legs just for a second. She didn't look wanton though. It was more a look of wonder, childlike perhaps, even though she was clearly in her twenties. "Do you want to see?" he asked. "Let me out and I'll show you."

She looked unsure, torn between entering into an adventure with a boy she didn't know, and betraying the trust of someone important. She stood and looked at Joel, then Sally, and finally Mia. She backed away to the table that Ewan had the saw and blade on.

"Please," Joel said, again.

She reached across onto the table and picked up a small bunch of keys.

"That's it." Joel crouched, knees apart in the front of the cage.

The girl came over and slowly, deliberately, yet unsure, took the padlock off of Joel's cage. She pulled the door open. Joel climbed out, hunched after being in it for so long. He cricked his back, and then backhanded the girl hard, knocking her to the floor. It came so far from left field that Mia nearly screamed out herself. "What the fuck," she whispered.

"Come on." Joel bent down and picked the keys up from the blood wash on the floor, and fumbled trying to open Sally's cage. The girl got to her knees. Her dress was covered in blood. She pulled it away from her skin and looked down at herself. Her face contorted in horror at the sight of it.

"Joel," Mia pointed at the girl.

Joel thrust the keys into Sally's cage and dropped them. Then he turned on the girl. She started to make the strangest noise. Horror, mixed with fear, sadness, all blended into one long whine that was slowly getting louder, and was sure to become a scream at any moment. Naked, Joel didn't cut much of a figure. He was too thin in most places, and didn't have a muscle on him. He had a little paunch belly, where he spent too much time drinking beer and eating hotdogs.

Or peopledogs.

For the first time Mia could see the state of his body after the beating he said he had gotten. He had purple marks, big ones, down his left rib cage, and green bruising across the same shoulder. He had dried blood on his face. It looked like it had come out of his ear. Probably what had made him black out for so long. At least he didn't seem to have brain damage.

He raised his hand up in a fist, and slammed it into the girl's face. She was still kneeling, so he had the advantage of height. She stopped whining. But he hadn't hit her hard enough to knock her out, or even down. She stared at him for a moment, and then took in a deep breath. Joel thought she was going to scream and raised his fist once again. She breathed out. A huff. She stared at him, but didn't move.

Joel turned back to Sally. She was fumbling with the keys. He dropped to his knees and took them from her, finding the right key and opening the padlock.

The girl jumped to her feet and turned, running to the door.

“Joel,” Mia screamed—too loudly. “Get her.” But it was too late. By the time Joel had turned she was out the door. Gone into the sun. “Fuck,” she screamed. “Get me out of here.”

Sally was crawling out of the cage, and Joel had gone over to the door. He was watching through, beyond. “Quickly,” he said quietly.

Sally pushed key after key at the padlock trying to find the right one. “Come on,” she muttered. Finally one found its way home and the padlock popped open. Sally dragged it off and the door opened.

Mia crawled out. She was sore. Her skin was burning from lack of movement, and the inability to straighten.

Joel waved them to the door. “We need to go. Now.”

Mia and Sally joined him, behind. “What do we do?”

Joel scanned the courtyard. “We’re going to have to run. Split up. It’s the most likely way that one of us will make it. Get out. Call the police. Get them back here in case one of us doesn’t make it.” He watched the girl. She was across the courtyard. There was shouting. At first it was the woman she had gone to. She was pointing at the girl’s dress and screaming at her. Then the girl managed to point back over to where they were. “Now,” he said, again. The older woman hurried away towards another building. “They’re coming.”

“I want to come with you.” Sally held onto Joel’s arm tight.

He wrestled himself free. “No. Go alone. Both of you. It’s the safest way.”

CHAPTER 11

Joel

Joel took off out of the door of the building and hooked around to the right. There was another building there, in front of him. He hurt. Running hurt. But he had to do something to try and get away. He hoped that Sally and Mia were watching to see which way he went, so they wouldn't follow. Go a different way. They'd be easier to catch. Slower. He had the best chance. He'd find a town. Call the cops.

He went to the left of the building. He was on dirt and grass, but the stones stuck in his feet. He could feel them digging in. Cutting into him. He wanted to stop. He wanted to try the back door to the building that he was rushing by, find some shoes. Clothes. But that was stupid. If they caught up to him … His mind drifted back to Lucas. It wasn't imaginable what they would do to him if they caught him.

He hoped they'd go for the girls first. *They would be less likely to kill them. Right?*

At the back of the building he saw a stone wall. Beyond it were trees. He couldn't see how many. A forest? That was hopeful. But anything to stop them from seeing him.

Then the sound of dogs came. The dogs from over by the caravans? Surely they weren't attack dogs? Sniffers? He resisted the urge to look back at them. Maybe they were just hungry.

Maybe they just had a taste for human flesh.

They might have been fed human sludge repeatedly. He ran harder. He wasn't good at running. He wasn't used to it. He was good at watching horror films and eating pies. Damn it. When he got out of this he needed to start doing cardio or some shit.

He ran at the wall. Vault it, he said to himself. Just like the hurdles at school. Back in the day. Just don't fuck it up like that. His left foot ground in some nettles and the spiking pain started almost immediately. The dogs were getting closer. He thrust his good leg forward and leapt. Eat your heart

out Aries Merritt. Joel caught his front foot on the stone wall and took a gash out of it. He grunted in pain, but managed to carry on over. He landed, stumbled, but kept his footing. Then his foot rolled over on his ankle as the pain of the gash jettisoned up his leg when it hit the cold, wet, mud. “Damn it,” he muttered under his breath. There was a gun shot in the distance. A scream. He could hear voices now. Behind him. He couldn’t hear what they were saying but they were following him. “Fuck.”

He reached the treeline and cast a glance back. They were nearly at the wall already. Men. Three of them. They had dogs on leads—thank fuck—and the dogs were pulling forward. Joel didn’t know shit about dogs. They were just dogs. Big fucking dogs. “Fuck,” he muttered. He ducked into the trees, cracking his toes on a protruding tree root almost immediately and falling to the grass. He scrambled back up and carried on, limping.

The twigs, small branches, and whatever the fuck else stuck out of trees, and the ground, all jabbed at his naked body, scraping his skin. Drawing blood. He didn’t stop. Couldn’t. He’d be dead for sure.

The sound of running water caught him. There was hills and rises he had seen from the cage when they dragged him out of the lorry after stopping. Maybe a river or something that ran between them? It was a hope. Something he could follow. People built towns on rivers, right? But the way the forest enveloped him, he couldn’t make out which way the noise was coming from. The dogs barked. He couldn’t tell where they were either. “Jesus.” He ran towards where he thought the noise of the water was coming from.

Joel involuntarily let out a cry as a branch snapped and spiked him in the shoulder, close to where Ewan had stabbed him.

There was a shout from one of the men. They were near. They’d heard him.

Then the sound of the dogs increased. Louder, quicker. They’d let them go. They were coming in on him.

Then the ground went from under him. Joel was falling. He hit the ground, dirt, soil, stone, rock. Tumbling. He was falling down an incline. He felt things entering him. Stinging him. He rolled to a stop. “Fucking hell,” he muttered. When he tried to move a sharp pain from his leg overtook all thought. “No,” he said weakly, dropping his head back. The

dogs were close. Top of the incline, probably. He couldn't see them, there was too much overgrowth. But he didn't know if they could see him. He ignored the pain and tried to see his leg.

Bone had broken the skin where his shin had snapped like a twig and jutted out of the flesh a few inches above his foot. In the big scheme of things it probably wasn't that bad, but he wasn't going anywhere.

The dogs stopped barking. The men had caught up with them. Joel pulled himself in as close as he could to the incline and tried to hide himself within the undergrowth. He was half in and half out of the water. He'd found the river, at least. Over the sound of the water he could hear the men. They were making their way through the undergrowth. Slowly. Carefully.

The dogs had probably let on that he wasn't moving anymore. There were snaps of wood. Footsteps in the undergrowth.

One of the dogs started barking.

Joel didn't move. He couldn't. What was the point?

There was a splash in the water and Joel lifted his head. Only a few feet away stood one of the men, holding a dog that was silently pulling on the lead. Joel tried to drag himself away, instinctively, but there was another behind him. The two men looked at each other knowingly, there was a nod. Then the dogs were released.

They hunched forward, like they were stalking him, but there he was, helpless in front of them. He only saw two. He thought there were three a few minutes ago, but anything could have clouded his thoughts. The one on the left was snarling, its lips held up. It was baring its teeth, drool slipping from its mouth as it awaited the delicacy of his flesh and blood.

The two animals left the dry of the bank and stepped out into the water. They were making sure he couldn't run. He looked at his fucked leg, and broken feet. How little they knew.

That was when he heard the other one breathing. It was behind him. Above his head on the incline. Joel shook his head.

Both the dogs in front of him went straight into his lower legs. The access they had with him being naked made everything easier for them. But not, apparently quicker. Joel screamed as the first clamped its teeth down on his bare flesh, on his good leg. The other seemed to want to grab the bone that already stuck out of his leg and pull it out further. He tried to kick

them, kick them away from him, but he didn't have the strength, nor the muscle. The dogs pulled at the flesh, tearing tendons from skin. Blood spraying on their fur. Their eyes staring straight into Joel's. Finally, as he fought, the third dog came from behind, sliding down onto his neck. The thing clamped its teeth into his skin, chowing down hard on his throat, his gullet filling with blood. He tried to cry out, but couldn't breathe. He spat blood trying to punch at the third dog, but it didn't feel his pathetic strikes, as the dog dragged part of his throat away in its mouth, leaving nothing but a gape, bubbling in blood as Joel drowned on his own bodily fluids, the light disappearing from his eyes.

CHAPTER 12
Mia and Sally

Sally watched Joel tug his hand away from hers and run out, naked, into the courtyard. She glanced at Mia. “What do we do?”

“Run,” Mia replied. “Come on. Together.” Mia took Sally’s hand and dragged her out the door. Joel was running to the left of the house. Mia pulled Sally towards the right. She looked over to the girl with the blood down her dress, but kept running. She was watching them, holding the side of her face where Joel had lashed out at her. Mia dragged Sally around the side of the building. “Look,” she said. There was a woodland in front of them. She looked to the side and saw Joel vaulting a wall towards the same set of trees, just further down. There was the sound of dogs behind them. A shot from a rifle cracked through the air. It was close to them. Mia instinctively ducked her head down, keeping one foot going down in front of the other. Sally screamed. There was the sound of ricochet from the wall to their left. Mia dragged Sally around the same wall, through an open gate, half destroyed, and into the trees.

The going was hard. The soil wet. There were stinging nettles everywhere. Mia was trying to avoid them as best she could.

Sally tumbled and fell to her knees. Mia stopped and pulled at her to get her back to her feet. She saw them. Behind her. Three of them. A man with a rifle—he was already bringing it up to his shoulder. With him was Ewan and a woman. They were giving chase. “Get up.” She pulled Sally with all her strength. “They’re going to fucking kill us.” Sally wobbled to her feet and Mia yanked her to the trees as the rifleman got the gun up.

They were inside the treeline when he fired.

The bullet splintered the bark of a tree not five feet from Mia’s face. She let out a yelp, and let go of Sally’s arm. “Keep going,” she said. “Low, fast. No speaking.” Mia bent forward and kept moving. She kept her knees up so she didn’t fall over the tree roots, and vines. It was like a rainforest on

the floor. She rounded a tree, down to the right. She did her best to move in a straight line. No sense in weaving. She wanted to make ground fast and hard. She didn't look back. Sally had better be behind her. She felt wood give beneath her feet snapping, and she nearly lost her balance. She needed to keep her concentration. Mia looked up through a break in the trees. The sun was coming down by the look of it. They'd been captive for nearly a day. *Good*. The only way she could see them getting out of this was for night to fall.

There was the sound of running water in front of her somewhere. Damn. There was no way the two of them were going to be able to cross a stream or river with no shoes. She hooked to the side to run parallel with the waterway. She noticed that Sally was behind her.

There was another rifle shot.

It was in the distance. They weren't tailing them. Not effectively, anyway.

Mia dropped her pace, to a walk, huffing air into her lungs as best she could. Sally rested her hand on her shoulder. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well do it quietly," Mia responded.

Sally hissed in pain. "They're not following us, I don't think. What do we do?"

Mia hadn't slowed her pace by much. But Sally was right. They couldn't just keep running. She was in pain. Her feet must be cut to pieces. She rubbed her bare arms. She was cold, too. "We need to keep moving. Keep warm. I wonder how Joel did."

Sally came up to her side. "Can we stop for a minute?"

"No."

She touched her arm. "I need to stop for a minute."

Mia looked around. There was a fallen tree a few feet over to the side. "Over there." She led her over and behind the tree. "Down," she ordered.

Sally obeyed immediately. She sat down in the undergrowth, the leaves, vines, and pulled her foot up onto her knee. There was a nail sticking through her foot, in through the bottom, out the top. It looked like a railway sleeper nail.

"Holy fuck." Mia crouched. "When did that happen?"

Sally shrugged. “Just as we were leaving the room, I suppose.”

“What are you, made of stone?”

“No.” Sally looked at her. “It hurts like a cunting mother-twater, but I didn’t have much of a choice did I?” She pulled the nail through and out. “It missed the bone.”

Just as well, thought Mia, *otherwise you certainly wouldn’t be running on it*. “Okay. How you feeling?”

Sally stared blankly at her.

“Good point,” Mia said and smiled. “Joel will be fine,” she said. She had no idea, but it sounded reassuring. “Can you still walk?”

Sally nodded. She pulled herself by the tree trunk and tested her weight on her foot. Looking around, she asked, “Where do you think they are?”

Mia followed her look. “Well, they’re not going to give up, are they?”

They both ducked down at the sound of something moving in the trees. Behind the trunk they looked at each other. “It could have been a bear,” said Sally.

Mia frowned. “So you don’t think we’re in Britain anymore.”

Sally shrugged, and let out a half-exhausted, half-insane giggle. “Yeah. Right.”

“It could have been a badger.” Mia winked at her.

“Nope.” The voice came from above their heads. Mia looked up. Man with a rifle. It was pointing straight at Sally’s head.

“Fuck,” said Mia, just before he pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 13

Mia

It must have been a hunting rifle—not that Mia knew much about rifles—but she had seen films on Netflix where they had said something about calibre, which she had always assumed had meant bullet sizes. Anyway, the bullet size in the rifle must have been large, and Mia had equated that to a hunting rifle.

Because Sally's head split in two like a watermelon that had been dropped from a height. A big fucking height.

The sound itself was deafening, changing from a boom to an insane high pitched whine in seconds. The bullet must have torn a hole the size of a fist in her head, because her skull split down the centre. Sally's blood sprayed in all directions, like an explosive had gone off in her brain. Or someone from Scanners had thought about her too much. Mia just raised her hands as Sally's brain matter, bits of exploded skull, and blood, hair and skin, airbrushed her to a natural hue of burgundy.

Mia said, "Huh." She didn't know why.

Ewan appeared next to the man with the rifle and pulled it up in the air before he had time to squeeze one off into Mia's head too. "What the fuck are you playing at?" he said. "What happened to just wounding them? We already lost the boy."

Fuck.

Ewan reached down and grabbed Mia's arm, pulling her up to standing. "You better bring what's left of that one too," he said to Shooter McShootface.

Mia gathered together enough wherewithal to spit blood in Shooter's face, and got a slap for her effort. "Cunt," she muttered, as Ewan started to drag her away, back the way they had come.

—

Ewan dragged Mia through the forestry. He didn't speak. Not directly to her. There was a little muttering under his breath. He was clearly pissed off. As they reached the edge of the trees, and came back out into the sunlight, he said. "The dogs had the boy."

Mia didn't respond. What did he expect, really? For them not to run?

He pulled her away from the room that they had been held in previously. They were going somewhere else.

Mia was suddenly very aware of her nakedness. There were people watching her as she was paraded past the house, past the room, and out of the courtyard. People who stood outside caravans. Children. They pointed. She tried to cover herself with her free arm, but it wasn't particularly successful. "Where are you taking me?" she asked. She tried to sound empowered. She felt like shit, her friends were all dead, and she was about to be ground up for fake pork, but she wanted to sound like they hadn't beaten her.

"Got something to show you." He pulled her across the open towards the barn that stood a distance from the house. Too far to be walking naked.

Her feet hurt. They were bleeding, badly. She knew she had picked up infections. But what did that fucking matter now.

Ewan pulled her through the doors of the barn. From the outside, it was rickety, the inside fared no better. There was fresh hay on the floor that stabbed into her wounds. An old tractor sat unused for years, rusting in the corner. There was a hayloft above, a wooden ladder going up to it, high, treated wood stanchions ascended to the ceiling.

Underneath the hayloft was the girl who had let out Joel. Five or six people, including the woman she had gone running to, surrounded her.

The girl was naked now, too.

She had a gag wrapped around her head and stuffed into her mouth. Her hands were tied together and bound up to the floor above, but not suspending her. She was crying. Her hair was matted with sweat. She was looking down at the ground.

Subservient.

Mia suddenly felt responsible. She had no reason to. She was one of *them*. "What are you doing?"

"She has to be punished."

"It wasn't her fault," Mia said. She pulled against Ewan's grip—not for the first time—but he was far too strong to just release her by her twisting.

"Ellie shouldn't have gotten her dress dirty."

Mia stared at him. "What?"

"You're going to watch."

A young man stepped up, behind the girl. He was holding something Mia couldn't quite see. Ellie twisted to try and face him, but he continued circling around behind her. "Now girl," he said. "Let's just get this done." He unravelled the thing in his hand. A bullwhip.

"No," Mia said. "It wasn't her fault."

"That's why you're watching," Ewan replied. "Because she did it. But it was your fault."

There was a crack as the whip snapped across Ellie's bare back. She screamed wildly, the gag holding the sound in, so that people outside of this *inner circle* couldn't hear. He did it again. Ellie dropped her weight onto her arms as her legs gave out, and she started to spin. As she came around Mia could see the two strips across her back where the whip had parted the skin. Blood flecked across her and ran freely at the bottom of the wounds. She was crying, still.

"Stop it," Mia pleaded. She didn't know why she was trying to help. Maybe she just didn't want to watch.

Ewan just gripped her arm tighter.

The young man circled around Ellie a little and then there was another crack. Ellie didn't respond this time, she just hung there, resigned. Another crack, and another. Eventually the woman who Ellie had run to in her bloody dress simply said, "Enough."

As soon as she did, Ewan pulled Mia so hard, she nearly fell off her feet. He dragged her out of the barn and towards a white building behind it. One she hadn't paid any attention to, until this point. She tried to pull back, but Ewan didn't acknowledge her movements. "What's that?" she asked.

"Slaughter house."

Mia fought back against him, she tried punching at him and kicking, but he just shrugged it off. All she managed to do was get blood from her

feet on his trousers. They reached the door, white with frosted glass in it, and Ewan banged hard on the glass with a closed fist.

The door opened from the inside, and a man wearing a dirty white lab coat let them in.

The smell made Mia retch. A fetid meat stink ran through the air, like a packet of raw chicken that was out of date. He pulled her across the screed floor to a room on the left and pushed her in, slamming the door behind her. The room was bare concrete. No windows. Mia dropped to the floor and quickly examined her feet. There was cuts on cuts. Blood ran freely from them. Probably one of the reasons she was so weak. Her foot prints came from under the door to where she sat now. She glanced around the room. There was no way out except the way she had come in. A door, again with a frosted window. She blinked away the tears that grew in her eyes. She wasn't about to give them the satisfaction.

So this was it.

A slaughter house … somewhere. She realised that she didn't even know where she was going to die.

The shadow of a person walking by was cast against the window in the door.

Mia took in a deep breath. She wasn't going to die here. No fucking way. She had to get out there, and out into the field. It would be dark soon. It was her only chance. She stood. It hurt. Now the adrenaline had fled, her feet felt like she was standing on daggers. Her legs ached from running, stings covered her naked body. She looked down herself. Slashes and stabs from thorns and bushes, red lumps from the stings of plants and insects alike. She hobbled over to the door and tried the handle. It was open.

She pulled the door a crack and looked out. There was a man leaning against the wall over to the side. He was going to see her if she burst out and ran. Maybe she should? Get it over with?

She shook her head and scolded herself. No. She was getting out of this.

Ewan came back into view. He was pulling the trolley with Bertha on. He nodded some sort of greeting to the other guy who just walked off, dismissed. Mia backed from the door over to the opposite wall. Ewan

opened the door and pulled Bertha in. “Shall we get on with this?” he asked.

“Polite,” she said. “Nice.”

“Ah, until you three went and did all that I thought we might have had a rapport.” He tilted his head to the side. “Obviously not.”

“No.”

He pushed Bertha against one wall. On the bottom of the trolley were three bowls, a large hacksaw and a long bladed knife. Similar, if not the same, as the tools he had used before.

“So this it?” she said.

Ewan nodded. He turned to the trolley and reached down, wrapping his fingers around the blade. Mia charged at him. She threw herself onto his back. He was a big guy. Big up close. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed, expecting him to drop to the floor like he was being tackled by Hulk Hogan. He let go of the knife and reached around to her, his massive hands patting around trying to find something to grab hold of. It was the first time she’d been glad she was naked. At least she was harder to grab.

He still hadn’t gone down.

Fucker.

She squeezed harder and he choked. It wasn’t much but it was something. He turned and started to walk towards the door like she was an inconvenience, not someone choking the life out of him. She let go and dropped to the concrete floor, spun around and grabbed the blade from the bottom of the trolley. He was big. But he was slow. He turned around, half expecting her to be sprawled on the floor at his feet. He didn’t see the blade coming. It was a long blade, flexible, good for boning.

“Fuck you,” she said, jabbing the knife at his gut.

She was on the floor. On her knees. She pushed the blade as hard as she could, up, into his stomach. It pierced him surprisingly easily. The long slender blade disappearing into his bulk, further and further. She pushed at him, running him through. Then the blade stopped sharply. She guested she’d hit bone. His spine, maybe. He stared at her. She wasn’t under any illusion that he was dead, or anything like that. Not after the noise and

thrashing that Lucas had made. She thought he was probably just quite surprised. She yanked the blade back out of him, falling back onto her arse. He grabbed at his gut as a large patch of blood appeared on the front of his shirt. Quicker. Bigger. Blood dribbled out, over his hands. He made a strange grunting noise.

Mia knew that he would straighten and scream.

She got up and swung the blade at his head. It hit him, cracking into his skull, and knocking him over to the side. She'd hoped it was going to impale him. Damned bone. He was rolling on the floor, trying to get back to his knees, probably in shock. Mia turned to Bertha and pulled the ripcord hard. Bertha turned over, and spluttered some profanity before falling quiet again.

Ewan started to mutter under his breath.

Mia picked the blade up again, and stabbed it into him. He was on his hands and knees, his head down. She aimed the blade at the side of his body. The first stab bounced off of him. Hit his ribcage. She pulled back and tried again. A half-inch higher. Straight in. Through. Must have hurt too. Ewan let out a grunt, and then coughed, spattering the floor with blood. Mia let the blade go, leaving it where it was. He was coughing, wheezing, struggling to breath. She grabbed the ripcord and pulled again. Harder. Faster.

Bertha choked to life. The stank of diesel flooding the room.

Now she was making more noise than he was.

Mia turned and grabbed the handle of the knife. Ewan hadn't moved. It was like he was frozen there. The pain when he moved, probably. She twisted the knife as far as she could and Ewan screamed, his voice dying under Bertha's loud chug. Then she pulled the blade out. She kicked him, flat footed on the rib cage where the blade had just come out from. He rolled over to his side and collapsed on the concrete. Mia kicked him again. He spluttered blood out onto his face. Mia dropped the knife and picked up the hacksaw. She dropped to her knees by his head as he lay there helpless.

"You see me?" she whispered. "You see me here naked before you?" She raised the blade to be in front of his eyes. "These are the last things you'll even see." She rammed the teeth of the blade down onto Ewan's neck and drew the blade back hard. Ewan choked and spat out more blood. What

didn't come from his mouth rivered out of the gash in his neck. She pushed the blade forward. Blood flew across the floor, out as far as the wall. Ewan looked at Mia, only able to move his eyes. He stared into her eyes. Maybe it was his last plead for life? Mia thought he was probably going to die now, regardless of whether she stopped or not. She drew the blade back, pushing harder.

"Fucker," she said.

C H A P T E R 1 4

Mia picked the blade back up. She went over to the door and looked out, Bertha making enough noise to cover her killing Ewan. There was no one outside the door. She opened it far enough to see if there was anybody about. There wasn't. She could see through the window on the other side of the building that dusk had come. Maybe they'd all finished for the night? She opened the door all the way and checked around. She couldn't hear anything because of Bertha, but she couldn't see anyone either.

She crept over to the door leading outside. There was no one. Over by the farmhouse, the room they were kept in, and the caravans there were people, but no one near here. There were lights on. They were going about their business, none the wiser of what had just happened here. They thought their Ewan was in here peacefully making Miadogs. She looked down at herself. She was splashed liberally in Ewan's blood. Bits of him stuck to her. His flesh. Bits of bone where she'd decapitated him. She'd thought about dropping his trousers and cutting his cock off, feeding it into Bertha's gaping maw-hole, but she didn't have time.

His blood mingled with hers, over her cuts. Slipping into her blood stream.

They were joined now, inexplicably. And she hated it.

Mia slipped out of the door. She had decided to run for the trees again. It was the only way she could see that she would be able to make any sure distance before morning, without them catching up to her.

She took a step. Then she glanced over to the barn. It was close.

And she had to know.

She ran over to the barn, the lack of light helping hide her figure as she did. She slipped her head around the door, and looked around. There was no one in there. But she could hear a light sobbing. The girl in the bloody dress —Ellie—she must still be in there.

Mia moved as quietly as the straw would allow, across the room to the hayloft and under. She could barely see. She fumbled her way across to Ellie, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She was still where they had left her. She was back on her feet now, but still tied, naked, bloody. Mia hurried

over. “Quiet,” she hissed. She took the blade and sawed through the rope that held her there. She could have untied herself easily.

It was surprising how misplaced some people’s loyalties were.

Mia looked around, and saw Ellie’s bloody dress on the ground. She picked it up and thrust it into her arms. “Put it on,” she said. Ellie just stared at her, and Mia had to assume that she understood what she was saying. “Come on.” Mia took her arm to lead her out, but Ellie just stood there. Mia gripped her tighter and pulled. “I’m getting you out of here.” She pulled Ellie, who took a tentative step towards the door. As they slowly made their way out from under the hayloft, a young man walked into the barn, holding a torch. He shone it directly Ellie’s face.

“What the fuck?” he said with a hard northern accent.

Mia lunged at him, running him through with the blade, without thinking. He dropped the torch and grabbed the knife, as Mia released it. He fell to the side, and over. Mia turned and grabbed Ellie, manhandling her towards the door. As soon as they were out in the open, Ellie pulled away from her.

“She’s over here,” she shouted, pointing at Mia. “She’s over here! *She stabbed Liam*.”

Mia looked at her, mouth open. “You stupid cunt,” she said. She drew her fist back and punched Ellie in the mouth, dropping her to the floor, and shutting her up. Mia looked back to the encampment, the farmhouse and such. Ellie had gained some attention. Mia quickly picked up Liam’s torch and she slid the knife out of him, as he lay prone on the floor.

She grabbed Ellie’s bloody dress, and ran towards the treeline.

Into the darkness.

The End

S I C K F * C K

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

Alex Cole was sitting in a rental Cherokee Jeep outside Newingland Primary School. There were some parents standing around the gates in the harsh autumnal winds, collars up, faces braced, waiting for the little munchkin release that occurred at two-thirty daily. Alex looked at the photo he'd busted out of the frame on top of the mantel piece of Jason Jones's living room.

Jason was his client.

Alex watched the commotion on the playground inside the fencing. A couple of teachers came out of the building followed by a line of brats. There was sudden screaming and waving as kids saw parents. You could see the looks in the parents eyes die, as they saw their freedom coming to an abrupt end. The teachers shouted, trying to keep the little fuckers in check. Alex looked for little Rush Jones. What kind of name was Rush Jones, anyway? He squinted over the heads of the parents to the line. Maybe he needed to get his eyes checked because it all looked like a fucking blur. Waiting until the commotion had reached the gates, Alex checked the mirrors before getting out the vehicle and crossing over. He had no desire to spend time with the doting dead-eyed families of these *children*. He stood at the back of the group. A couple of people gave him a glance, but looked away again without recognition. He guessed that newbies weren't found in the line very often.

That didn't make his life any easier.

Little bags of snot covered buggers were released one at a time, and ragged looking parents suddenly switched persona to *Hey's* and *How was your day's*, before dragging the little ones off, not really listening to the answers.

As Alex got close to the gate, he made sure to familiarize himself with Rush—stood in the playground—and stuffed the picture back in his pocket. When he was stood facing the woman on the gate he smiled as warmly as he could. "Hi." he pushed his hands into his pocket, in anticipation of the

first question. “My name’s Logan Jones, I’m here to pick up my nephew, Rush.”

The woman frowned and looked at her clipboard. All being well, he should have been added as a responsible person with the ability to pick up the little shit. He’d called ahead a couple of days ago pretending to be Jason Jones, and wanting to add his brother, Logan, who was visiting the family and *wouldn’t it be nice if he could meet him from school, as a surprise?* They’d gone for it hook, line, and sinker, and hopefully, he would be allowed to take charge of the kid.

“Can I see some ID?” the woman asked.

Alex pulled a wallet from his pocket and opened it, pulling out the fake driver’s license he’d knocked up in the office last week. The same one he’d used to rent the Cherokee. He handed it to the woman. It wasn’t great, as far as fake ID’s went, but this woman had probably never seen a fake in her life and wouldn’t have a clue. Grabbing kids was surprisingly easy, even in this day and age.

She looked at it and passed it back, before waving over Rush, who was looking at his feet in some dejected manner. “Rush, come here. Your uncle is here.” Rush looked up and half walked, half ran over. He wasn’t really old enough to be able to do either with skill yet. He looked like an uncoordinated baby deer, wearing an oversized puffer jacket with elastic coming out of each arm and a mitten attached, with a bobble hat on. He looked like a shit rip off of Home Alone’s *Kevin*. He looked up at Alex and smiled, pushing out his fat little fucking cheeks.

He was six.

He should have been better at walking and shit by now, at least, that was what Alex thought, but what did he know? Alex crouched down to greet the rug rat. “Hey, Champ.” He grinned at him and put his arms out and the retarded little fucker ran into them.

See? Stealing kids was really easy.

Alex stood, picking the kid up and nodded at the woman. “Thank you,” he said, turning back to the Jeep. He checked both ways and then crossed over, fumbling about trying not to drop the fidgeting little fucker, while

getting the back door open. He would have liked to just throw the squirmy little shit in the boot.

Maybe later.

He got the door open and then fought to get the kid into the car seat. He should have practised with it before he got there, but he was short of time what with renting the car and buying and fitting the car seat. He didn't think it was fitted right, but that really didn't matter. Not in the big scheme of things. He finally hooked the child in, and glanced over to the gates as he rounded the car. The woman stood there was watching him, looking more than a little concerned.

He waved over, pretending all was good.

He hopped in the car and started the engine.

"Where's Mummy?" The boy spoke for the first time.

Alex looked at him in the rear view mirror. Stupid kid was playing with his mittens like they were action figures or something. "She's waiting for you somewhere special," he said. "But it's a surprise."

"Yay," the kid screamed. Far too loudly for Alex's liking.

Alex took the car out into the traffic and away from the school. He had all the time in the world, but he wanted this over with quickly. He hated kids. *Really* fucking hated them. Which, in all fairness, meant that he liked his job, which was something.

C H A P T E R 2

Alex pulled the car off the motorway into the industrial estate outside of the city. He had found the perfect place to do this over the last few days. He'd reconned the area looking for somewhere quiet, private, but close enough to the kid's school that he didn't have to put up with him in the car for too long.

Rush had behaved pretty well. He was quiet in the back seat, and entertained himself. If Alex had been someone else he might have felt sorry for the kid. But he wasn't. And he didn't.

He also didn't want to fuck him.

But he should.

The industrial estate was rundown. It was mostly shells of businesses and that meant it was perfect. He wasn't going to be there long, but it was out the way, and witness free, hopefully. He drove the industrial estate through its heart and out the other side to the last tendrils of roads, where the very remnants of business lay. He drove down a cul-de-sac, Marshal Road, an old tire place, defunct on the corner.

At the end of the road, Alex pulled the car through the gates of a ramshackle factory. The gates were open, as they had been when he'd scouted the place a few days ago, hung half off their hinges. The old chain link fence had holes in it. The building, he knew, was just as secure. After he'd parked up, Alex looked at Rush, still lost in his own little world of toy mittens. He was clearly *special*.

"Hey, Champ, how you doing?"

The boy looked up from his game and smiled in the mirror at Alex. "Where's Mummy?" he asked again.

Alex pointed at the building they were parked in front of. "She's in there. We're going to perform a trick for her. Won't that be fun?"

The boy frowned. "Like a magic trick?"

Alex nodded. “Yeah, Champ. Like a magic trick. You wait here, and I’ll go get it ready, and then you can come in and we’ll perform.”

The boy made some cheering sound, before losing himself back into whatever game he was playing in his head. He didn’t seem all that together for a six year old. Alex got out the car and went around to the boot, retrieving a holdall. He closed the boot and pressed the button on the fob to lock the door. While the kid wasn’t smart enough to make a break for it—Alex doubted he was smart enough to open the door without a diagram—this wasn’t a great area, and he would have hated for someone to grab the kid. *That would cause all sorts of fucking problems*.

He went into the building through the unlocked reception door and out the back to the factory floor. There, in the centre of the room was the trick. An old magician’s box that would be used for fake-sawing his assistant in half to wow the audience. It was originally a simple device that relied on the assistant cocking their legs up under their chin and poking fake feet out the bottom. Alex dropped his bag next to it and pulled out a pair of black gloves, putting them on. He took the handcuffs that he had brought with him from the bag and placed them on top of the magician’s box, which itself sat on a table. There was nothing else in the room.

The table.

The box.

The handcuffs.

Alex checked the corners of the factory floor to make sure that there hadn’t been any interlopers in the last few hours, particularly anyone that might still be there. Kids, most likely, meth heads. *Witnesses*.

Satisfied, he lay the holdall under the table and returned to the car.

He unlocked it and opened the door, sticking his head in the back to Rush. “Okay, Champ. Ready?” He didn’t wait for the boy to stop playing, or even acknowledge him. Alex reached over and unhooked the kid’s belt, and lifted him like a dead weight from the car. “Mummy’s inside, waiting in the back for us to get ready.”

The kid just squealed, “Mummy!”

Fucking hell.

Alex carried him into the building and through to the back, setting him down to walk on his own once they were on the factory floor. He took his hand and led him to the box. The boy looked at it with some sort of retarded wonder on his face. "What is it?" he asked.

"Magic box." Alex let go of his hand. "Magic box does magic things."

"Like what?"

"You'll see." Alex took the cuffs from the top of the box. "Like an escapist, yeah?" The boy giggled, understanding the next step in the magic trick and thrusting his hands out like he'd just been caught bang to rights on CSI. Maybe that was it? Maybe he'd been jammed in front of the TV for too long. Like, fourteen hours a day every day for the last six years? Alex slapped the cuffs on the kid. They weren't real hand cuffs. Firstly, Alex didn't want to waste the money on a real pair that he wasn't going to get back, and secondly, he expected the kid would be able to slip a pair of adult *proper* cuffs with his tiny, weird, child-sized wrists. Having met this particular kid, he'd given him too much credit. This kid probably couldn't get out of a chair without help. Either way, he'd picked up a pair of sex cuffs. Not proper BDSM things either. Pink fluffy shit that looked like they'd break if you twisted them hard enough.

And now the kid was wearing them, he was starting to look like a midget hooker, but it still wasn't helping him want to fuck him.

Alex smiled, and stopped himself from laughing. The kid probably wouldn't get the joke. He bent down and lifted the kid into the box. It was like putting a squirming cat in a coffin. Putting the kid's hands above his head, he locked the cuffs into place on the top of the box and closed the lid of it, over the kid.

Rush screamed, having been plunged into darkness.

Alex opened the flap revealing the kids face. "Is Mummy watching now?" he asked.

"Sure." Alex looked down on the poor kid. Perhaps this was for the best. The kid was a simpleton, plain as day. He crouched down to access the bag under the table and as he did the kid started giggling. *Jesus Christ*. He

opened the holdall and pulled out a multi-purpose saw. One he'd picked up in a hardware store in a small village about a hundred miles south of here. Unbranded. Untraceable. He stood.

The kid was staring at him. "Mummy?" he called, waiting with a look of expectation for the response.

"Wait there." Alex sighed and closed the lid. He flexed the saw like a wobble board in the hands of some legendary pervert that he couldn't remember the name of. *Wob-wob*. He grinned. "And now comes the screaming." He could hear the kid breathing irregularly in the box anyway, and probably about to start bawling again because he didn't like the dark. *Well, get ready for this*. Alex slid the teeth of the blade into the slit in the box in the centre. It was part-perforated to allow for the magician's easy sawing action, and so when Alex drew back the brand new sawblade, it slipped through to the kid's skin like butter. He held it there, feeling the weight of the blade on the boy. The boy, who hadn't noticed the impending pain.

With it supported by the slit in the box, Alex pushed the saw hard forwards, jaggedly cutting into the child. It slipped through his clothes, probably ripping them, rather than cutting them, and then bit at his skin, tearing into his flesh. Well, that was what Alex was imagining was happening—not that he could see.

Then the kid started howling. It was an interesting sound, something like an ambulance raping a pig violently and without lube. Then came the scream of *Muuuuuuum*.

Blood started to pool with vigour on the table below the box.

Alex took in a deep breath and pulled the saw back, feeling the blade swoop into the boys guts and pushed, digging it deeper. The little cunt stopped making all noise pretty quickly. *Good*. Alex left the saw hanging out of the side of the box, and breathed in once. The stink of iron and stomach acids was in the air. He breathed out and opened the flap to check Rush was dead. He was staring lifelessly outwards, with a few flecks of blood on his face as they had splashed up, inside the box. Alex closed it again. He pulled the two halves of the box apart, like the magicians would,

but rather than spin them around with his assistant waving gleefully at an audience, the kid's insides slooped out of the two halves of his body onto the table beneath.

Alex looked at each half in turn. He really should fuck part of it at least, and this was more appealing than when the kid was alive. He ran his finger in a circular motion around a hole in the bits of Rush that were still inside the top half of his body like he was making a crystal glass sing. Or it was a hookers arse. He gently inserted his finger to gauge depth and lubrication. It was still warm, whatever it was. Maybe an intestine. He glanced to the bottom half of the body. The same opening was there too.

Neither were getting him hard.

It was very unprofessional to leave a job incomplete.

He stepped back from the table, wiping his finger on the kid's ragged clothes and scraped his feet on the hard concrete to make sure he didn't have any kid innards on him. "Aw, fuck." He looked under the table at the holdall that was sitting in Rush-goo. He was going to keep that. He'd picked it up from a motorway service station—charging Jones as an expense—but he'd quite liked it. It was rather natty. Well, bollocks. It was staying now. He wasn't about to risk physical evidence because of a bag.

Maybe he could pick up another one on the way back home.

He pulled out his burner phone and speed dialled Rush's father—the only number in the phones memory. "It's done," he said when Jason Jones answered. "Never mind where. It's best you don't know. I've rigged it up to look like a Gacy copycat. Except I sawed him in half. Shit. Sorry, I didn't mean to tell you that. Forget I said anything. But I didn't fuck him." Alex fell silent listening to Jason. "No … Gacy used to. Part magic trick, part sex show, but I didn't fancy doing the kid, though. Little retard probably wouldn't have noticed anyway—" Jones's voice got louder. "It's all part of the copycat thing … but I did fuck your wife." Then there was shouting. "What? She was the one who was fucking around town and got herself impregnated. I thought you'd be happy?"

He clearly wasn't.

“Well,” Alex interrupted, “what are you going to do about it? Leave a bad Yelp review? I have records of you hiring me to murder your bastard son. I threw in the bitch as a freebie.” Jones started crying. “It’s all right,” Alex said, soothingly. “I killed her too, so there’s nothing tying it to you.” The crying got louder. It was lucky that he’d already been paid, because this wasn’t going in the right direct, and Alex’s business wasn’t one that tended to go to small claims court. “Anyway,” he continued as Jones cried. “Gotta go. Please do give me a shout if there’s anything else I can do.” He doubted there would be.

All said and done, Alex rarely had repeat business due to the nature of it, but it didn’t hurt to let people know he was available. It’s not like he had business cards.

Maybe he should have business cards?

C H A P T E R 3

Alex left the estate and hit the motorway going south. He'd lose the burner in the services at the bottom of the M1. Then there would be nothing tying him to the killings, except Jones himself, and he'd be a fool to let on. He'd spend nearly as much time in the big house as Alex would. A few times, when the job looked to be going pear shaped at the end of it—usually because the client was having cold feet—he'd thought about disposing of the last of the evidence, but if it got out that he was taking out the client, it'd be bad for business.

—

It'd all began when Alex had opened *Coles Investigations*. It was a simple set up. He'd rented an office just off the High Street in Ashbury—one of the cathedral and University cities in Kent, slapped a sign on the window and waited for the jobs. It was going to be like in the movies. He was going to have dames in the office, slathering all over him because they thought their husbands were fucking their secretaries and Alex was going to tail them and snap them in the act, like some shitty porno photographer, except with more hiding, and more sexual perks from overly thankful wives and girlfriends.

Except, not so much.

He barely managed to scrape the rent together, even living in the office. He started to stink a little too, what with there being no shower there. Once, he'd tried to use the showers at the Uni swimming pool, but he'd gotten his times all fucked up and ended up naked in front of a teenage swim team. He could have lied and said there was a happy ending, but alas, not. But that was a different story.

Anyway, just as being on the brink of bankruptcy was about to close the door for the last time, Alex was sitting in his office, with his thumb up his arse—metaphorically—, when a relatively well to do looking guy comes in. He was probably in his forties. Pot belly. He was wearing a suit that to a trained eye betrayed the air of money he was giving out. It was more

Sainsbury's chic, than Saville Row. The guy introduced himself as Roger Smith, but pronounces it Sm-high-th. Twat. He said that he thought his wife was cheating on him, and that he wanted some evidence.

Alex jumped at finally having a proper job.

Smith handed over all the details and gave Alex a week to come up trumps with the evidence. So Alex jumped straight on the case without a second thought. He took his private investigator camera (in hindsight, he should have just used the camera on his phone and spent the money on food), and staked out the Smith's house. All he had to work on was the photo Smith had left with him and a name. *Sharon*. Now, in the photo, Sharon looked a little younger than Smith, and even Alex had to admit that this dude was punching well above his weight. Their house was on the outskirts of the city and Alex took up residence in the car opposite.

His wealth of detective experience was coming from re-runs of Magnum P.I. and old movies. A little Murder She Wrote.

The first look he got at Sharon told him an abundance of information. For a start this chick was way younger than Smith. A good ten years. She was also hot. Not super-model shit-hot, but hot like most men leaving puberty up to the age of death would bang her without thought. So Alex tailed her. Barely three days in, and Sharon was disappearing into a hotel in the city centre, with obvious connotations. She was banging someone in there.

Only thing was, Alex couldn't get a looksy inside a decent and reputable joint like that. So he goes back to Smith and reported: Sharon is banging men in the hotel in the centre.

Smith was doubtful.

So he asked Alex if there is any way he can get evidence of her banging some other bloke, maybe he could get her in a compromising position himself? Now this intrigued Alex, but he felt that it was a little unethical. Against some code of conduct that he had yet to learn, being a shit detective and all. So Smith all but threw more money at him. His work to date had rolled Smith three hundred quid—which had Alex creaming in his pants, what with being able to pay the rent and all—but then Smith intimates that

Alex should screw his wife … for another thousand. And take photos, if possible.

This was all starting to sound like Alex was being invited to an over paid porn shoot, and he was most certainly okay that.

Alex followed Sharon for a few more days, discretely working out her routine. She seemed to be a lady of leisure, going to bars and such at lunchtime and meeting with *the girls*. Sometimes Alex witnessed acts of flirtation. Nothing major. Then she would go to the hotel in the centre and spend the afternoon.

On the fourth day, Alex bought a new suit from Matalan—thirty quid including the tie—and wore it while tailing her, following her into the hotel. She went in, and straight to the bar, where they seemed to know her, and she drank a cocktail.

Alex went to the bar and ordered a whiskey and dry. He had no idea what it was, but he'd seen his dad order it once, and it sounded classy. Tasted like shit, though. So he sipped his weirdly ginger flavoured whiskey and watched Sharon. She seemed to be taking her time, and certainly not actively seeking some sort of coupling. However, soon enough a guy came in. He went over to the bar and sat with her. They chatted briefly, she finished her drink and then she and this dude left.

Alex watched them go to the elevator in the lobby and in.

What the fuck?

With no explanation for the event other than he was living there—who the fuck lives in a hotel in the middle of a city?—or that she was the local bike and everyone knows *she who will fuck anybody from the bar*, Alex is a little stumped. He went over to the bar and slipped up onto the stool that she'd just left from. It was pleasantly warm. He beckoned over the barman. "I don't suppose you know where I might find some company for the night, do you?" he asked as slyly as he could. He realised that slyly came off as sleazy, but potato, potato, right?

The barman gave an involuntary little look to the lobby, before he said, "If Sir is looking for some action, Sir is out of luck for today." Then he winked at him.

Alex was taken aback that he was working as a detective in a sleazy shithole city without realising it. Smith's wife was hooking. In the best hotel in the city. Fuck.

Well, at least it made the next part of Smith's demands a little easier.

But his expenses were going to go up, that was for sure.

C H A P T E R 4

Alex sat in the bar, on a stool, near where Sharon had sat the day previous. He'd already paid for a room for the night. There went three hundred of the thousand that Smith had given him upfront. He hoped he still had enough.

Giving the barman a nod in some stupid and somewhat childish attempt of saying, *why yes, I am looking for a prostitute*, he ordered a lemonade. No sense in impairing his performance, he assessed.

Then, as time went on—not even by that much—he scolded himself for not getting a whiskey. Why he was worried about his performance when he was about to screw a whore, he didn't know. Perhaps it was a professional concern. He wanted to look good in the photos, obviously. He was getting screwed up over nothing. Maybe he should order a proper drink.

No time for that.

Sharon walked in from the lobby, and headed over to a seat a few stools down from his. She was wearing a business suit that day. It gave her an air of one of those eighties movie dames, the ones that the rugged cop was going to fall for. A bit of rough, that sort of thing. She slipped onto the stool and the barman went straight to her, whispering something to her. She stood and came along the bar to Alex.

Christ. The barman was pretty much her pimp.

He wondered if he was getting a cut.

"Hi," she said, oozing onto the stool next to Alex.

"Why, hello," he replied. He came straight off as a fucking doofus.

"I believe you are looking for company?"

At least she was professional. "I am." Alex smiled at her.

"Two hundred for the hour, three thousand for the night."

Alex swallowed. *Seems reasonable*, he thought. "An hour?" He seemed unsure. "Maybe two?"

"Sounds good," she said. "What room are we in?"

Alex fumbled in his pocket for the key. He'd forgotten what room they'd given him. "Er, um." Fumble, fumble.

"There's no need to be nervous." She rested her hand on his hip.

Alex could feel himself getting hard. Shit. This was no time for his purity to get in the way. Sure, he'd *had* sex before. Just not a lot of it. *Not a lot*. Nowhere near enough. "Ah, here it is," he said, pulling the key from his pocket. "Two-eleven." She smiled and stood, taking his hand like they were a couple. They walked slowly, in silence, to the lift and she pressed the button, waiting. Alex was hyper-aware that all the staff in the hotel—the reception guy, the bell boy, that woman over near the door in a suit—they must all know he was about to hooker-up. *Damn*. He didn't want them to think that it was the only way he could get any tail.

Granted, in this current dry-spell—the last eighteen months at least—it was, but that wasn't the point.

Then they were in the lift. More silence. He wasn't sure if he should speak. Should he make small talk? He looked her up and down as she waited for them to go up the two floors. She was slim. Ample breasts, but not huge. Blond hair in a pony-tail. *Ding*. The doors to the lift opened and she stepped out, leading him straight around to the left. She knew the place like the back of her hand. It was like she worked there.

Well, technically she did.

Alex raised a smile, but kept himself under control.

Within seconds they were in the room. It wasn't bad. Not much more than a Travel Lodge, bed, bathroom, desk, open fronted wardrobe. Mirror. Kettle.

Sharon cleared her throat.

Ah, yes. Alex realised he'd spent too much time admiring the room, and not the prostitute. "What would you like first?" she asked.

Having never been with a working girl before—that was it, *Working Girl*. She reminded him of Melanie Griffith—Alex wasn't sure of the protocol. Did she leave when he'd finished? Wham, bam, thank you, man? If that was the case, why was she asking what he wanted *first*? Did he get to

finish as many times—oh, she was taking off his trousers. Alex guessed she gotten fed up waiting. He was thinking about this way too much.

His cock was hard before she'd gotten anywhere near it, and she had it in her mouth before Alex had even considered what he wanted *first*. This seemed good though.

Oh shit. He came. *Fuck*.

Sharon swallowed the lot without blinking before teasing the end of his cock with her tongue. She slid her mouth away from him. "Well," she said, sliding her arse back on the bed. "Wow."

Alex shuffled, embarrassed as he started to go flaccid. *Well, how am I getting photos now?*

Sharon looked at her watch. "We still have plenty of time," she said. "Let's see if we can't get you hard again."

Alex decided at that moment that prostitution should be legalised.

Sharon slipped from the bed like she was greased. "Take your clothes off and lay on the bed." She slipped silently into the bathroom and pushed the door to, but not closed. Alex could hear water running. He kicked his shoes off, flabbergasted that he'd finished up before he'd taken *those* off. Then his trousers, pants. He unbuttoned his shirt, fumbling, and managed to get on the bed without having a cardiac arrest. His heart was hammering.

He noticed his cock was hard again. Awesome job. Why was he congratulating himself? Who cared?

Sharon came out of the bathroom. She was wearing nothing but a pair of lace knickers. She admired his cock and ran her fingers over it. Before he knew it, she was on top of him, her knickers in his face, and she was playing with her tits. "You like this?" she was saying. She was grinning wildly. Either she was enjoying it, or she was a practiced actor. Alex pushed the memory of her being paid to do this to the back of his mind, and pretended she was enjoying it too. He wanted to reply, but couldn't find the words.

Photos. The thought kept nagging at the back of his mind. That, and *Oh God, I'm so hard I'm going to burst*.

Again.

Alex licked at her knickers, he really didn't know what else to do.

"Oh," she said. "You want that?" She got off him and stood next to the bed, sliding her knickers down and off. Alex slipped from the bed to allow her on, and she lay down, legs spread wide. Alex then buried his face in her snatch. It was well groomed and smelt nice. Which was something he concentrated on as he ate her out.

Next she got on her hands and knees and Alex was ploughing her from behind. She kept having loud, rolling orgasms—at least she *sounded* like she did. He hadn't realised he was that good in the sack.

As he was about to cum for the second time he pulled out, aware that he wasn't wearing a rubber. "Fuck," he muttered.

"What?" She wailed, moaning and groaning like he was Fabio or some shit. He was beginning to think she was putting it on.

"No johnny," he said.

"I don't care," she said. "Fuck me. Cum in me."

Urg. Alex suddenly remembered what the guy from yesterday looked like. He'd probably cum in her, maybe more than once. And she was there the day before that. And the day before *that*.

"Fuck me now," she demanded.

Suddenly, looking at the back of her head, all Alex saw was a cum-dumpster. Uh-oh. Flaccidity was returning. "I want to take your picture," he blurted. "As a memory."

Sharon rolled onto her back. "Another hundred," she said.

The illusion of him being a sexual god, and his masterful dick-work railing this gorgeous hunk of flesh to blood boiling orgasm time and again came crashing down. *Whore*. "No problem," he said.

"How do you want me?" She slid up the bed leaning her head against the headboard, and stuck two fingers up her twat.

Alex turned back to his suit, rumpled on the floor and pulled his detective camera from the inside pocket. He faced, her, slightly taken aback

by her willingness to immediately be photographed and snapped her a couple of times, ensuring he got her face clearly in both. He thanked her, and then knew he had to take one for the team if he didn't want to raise suspicion.

C H A P T E R 5

"As you can see …" Alex laid the photos across the desk. "… it's clearly her." He looked up at Roger, who was holding his face, staring through his fingers at the photos of Sharon, fingers up twat, in a hotel room.

"Did you fuck her?" he muttered.

"I don't think we need to discuss my methods." Alex smiled warmly at him, the memory of cumming over his wife's tits the previous afternoon still warming his cockles.

"I want you to kill her," he said, coldly.

"And a-what now?" Alex raised his eyebrows. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

"Kill her," he said. "Kill the fucking cunt."

"I think you should probably leave—"

"Here." Smith pushed his faux leather briefcase onto the edge of Alex's desk and popped it open. He pulled cash from inside and threw a wrapped pile of notes onto the photos. "Ten thousand."

Alex rubbed his chin. Part of him was nagging his conscience to throw the guy out of the office. This was disgusting. A total misappropriation of his skills, and totally unethical. The larger part of him was saying, *Mmmm. Ten thousand pounds. No more rent problems*. Alex reached forward and picked up the cash. "No backsies." Smith looked at him funny. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Well, I suppose, as you *are* a trusted client."

"But you listen," he said. "I want you to cut her up. Make it look like some dirty fucking client's gone psycho on her."

Alex thought about what Sharon had said yesterday, and said, "Another five thousand."

—

It had been surprisingly easy to get Sharon to leave the hotel. He'd met her that afternoon in the bar, and spun her a line about wanting to see her again

but having to change where they could meet. She had agreed to see him in a couple of days at his new place. For the night this time. His work in the city had changed, he told her, and he was staying for a little longer, so he was renting a shabby maisonette on the outskirts of the city.

The actuality of it was that he had broken into the place, and was going to borrow it for the act. Simple.

Two days later, at seven in the evening, Sharon arrived and Alex let her in. He'd purchased a Chinese takeout and scooped it into bowls to increase the illusion of his potential infatuation. *Made* her a nice meal. They ate it quickly.

Honestly, it was pretty shit, but she seemed impressed that he had tried. *At least that was the impression she gave*. Then he led her through to the bedroom.

He'd done some research online and had gotten all the information he needed.

Sharon perched on the edge of the bed. "We've got all night," she said. "Why don't we spend a few minutes in here and then watch a film?" Alex was distracted, but he decided to let her suck his cock. And she *seemed* to enjoy doing it. He'd had enough of her shit now and wanted it done with. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand leaving a gross trail of lipstick behind on her cheek, before excusing herself to the bathroom, while Alex got the TV ready.

He went to the kitchen and start popping some popcorn in the microwave—one of those shitty three for a pound bags that did the job, but impressed no one—and took the cleaver from the knife block.

He'd driven out of the city and picked everything up that he'd needed earlier that day. The expenses were climbing, but he still had all of the ten thousand from Smith in his desk at the office. He made a mental note that he was going to need to get a safe if this sort of work continued. He slid the cleaver under the cushion on the sofa and flicked the TV onto a movie channel. Fucking *Die Hard* was just starting. Awesome.

Sharon came back and sat next to him. He put his arm up and around her shoulders like he was into her, and they might make out like they were

at the movies. He was just biding his time. “Isn’t there anything else on?” she asked.

Anything else? Alex thought about grabbing the cleaver and finishing it there and then. Die Hard? Anything else? Fucking hell. “Like?” he asked.

“Something more sexy,” she said, taking the remote and flicking through the channels.

There’s nothing sexier than John-Fucking-McClane dropping fools out of windows, bitch.

She rose through the Freeview channels like a pro, until she got to the adult channels in the high numbers. Luckily, whoever actually owned this pad was schmoe enough to be paying for fucking porn channels, as they weren’t encrypted. What a loser. The Internet’s free, right?

Two girls were banging on the screen, yelping and squealing like fucking anime characters.

“You like that?” Sharon asked, slipping her hand into Alex’s trousers. With her jiggling him about and the lesbian’s sixty-nining on the TV, he was getting a little up. Then Sharon pulled his cock out and leaned down onto it, taking it into her mouth again.

A very small part of Alex wanted to off her in the morning, rather than now. This could be an interesting night, however, he really needed to get it done, and get out, before anything went wrong.

He kept his hand rested on the back of her head as she bobbed up and down, while he fished for the cleaver under the cushion. He needed her to be off him, before he struck, though. The last thing he needed was to have her bite his dick off when he cleaved her in twain. Then she pulled up and off, before he had it out. The cleaver, not his cock.

“Tie me up and fuck my arse,” she said, grinning wildly at him.

Alex nodded, silently, as the two of them returned to the bedroom. While Sharon stripped naked, surprisingly quickly—maybe she was actually getting into this?—Alex fished around in the wardrobes looking for something to restrain her with.

She lay face down on the bed and Alex used two of the schmoes ties to restrain her to the bedpost. She had her arse sticking up in the air. Alex quickly weighed some of the pro's and con's. He'd never done anal. That was a pro. He was about to hack her up, though. Probably a con.

He decided against it.

Alex hurried to the living room and retrieved the cleaver.

"What's the hold up?" she asked. For a prostitute, she seemed awfully impatient. Alex looked from the cleaver to her and back again. He should have just hacked the cleaver down into her and got the job over with, but he wasn't quite ready yet. Stage fright, perhaps. Thinking quickly he sucked his index finger and then jammed it into her arsehole. She squealed and laughed and he withdrew it, hoping that would sate this awful wench of a woman for a few moments.

This was all getting out of hand.

He felt the weight of the cleaver in his hand, his attention drawn to Sharon moaning in some weird ecstasy even though he was nowhere near her. Perhaps it was for the best, because at that second Alex lost his temper and straddled across her arse. She made a cooing sound and he raised the cleaver up, above his head. He'd seen films. This shouldn't be hard.

She was still making gooey noises like he was fucking Valentino or something. He tilted his head to the side. *No wonder she was so popular*.

Alex dropped the cleaver down like the executioner slinging the axe, except Alex slammed the blade into the bad of Sharon's head, splitting it in two. The weight of the blade, the strength of his thrust—he'd never know which—caused the cleaver to slide straight through Sharon and into the mattress below. He even let out a surprised little *eep*.

C H A P T E R 6

With her head split in two, Alex lifted the cleaver back up and looked at it like it held magic powers. Fucking Excalibur. Or He-Man's sword, whatever that was called. He looked down at Sharon, fragments of bone and goo slipping and sliding across what was left of her brain.

Her body twitched.

Alex jumped, the memory of Romero's zombies rising to the forefront of his mind, before he scrambled to the side of the bed. He let out a laugh, uncontrollably. *Zombies*. His heart was beating hard, and he could feel the adrenaline rushing through him. What now? He shook his head, trying to get himself straight.

Smith had already paid him, but he should collect some sort of evidence. He tossed the cleaver on the bed and went through to the hallway, doing his trousers back up as he went. Damn it. He looked at the floor. He was bare foot. There must be physical evidence fucking everywhere. Still, no time for that.

He got his detective camera out of his rucksack by the front door and went back to the bedroom. He snapped a photo of Sharon where she was laying, then looked at the picture. The head area was a bit blurred, or maybe that was her brains spewed out over the sheets? Surely if Smith asked, he'd know that this was her, just from the back of her body? He must know what his wife looked like?

Hold on. In a couple of days the police would find her and contact Smith. Then he'd know.

Still.

He should get a better photo. Alex put the camera on the bed next to the cleaver and untied Sharon. He pulled her across the bed and then rolled her over onto her back. Her head flopped open. There was brain everywhere. "Fuck it." Alex could feel the vomit roiling about in his stomach. The fucking shit Chinese was coming back with a vengeance. He swallowed it down. *Physical evidence*, he thought, over and over.

Alex pushed the two halves of Sharon's head back together and tried to balance them so that he could get the camera, but they kept wanting to flop open. He lost his temper, and stormed back into the living room, pacing back and forth. "Stupid fucking cunt … glad she's dead." He stopped, and looked around the room. His eyes fell on the schmoe's desk. Opening the drawers he found a roll of sellotape.

Fucking hallelujah.

He went back into the bedroom and spun the tape around and around the top of Sharon's head until the two halves stayed in place. She was still lop-sided, but she was definitely recognisable. He took the photo.

Standing there in the bedroom, he found himself admiring the ludicrousy of the situation. She was taped up, like some macabre mummy figure and naked. This was how the police would find her.

Or more likely, the schmoe. Who would need counselling, *possibly for years*.

Alex started to laugh. He roared with laughter until tears streamed from his face and he was bent over in two and slapping his thighs. "Fucking hell," he whimpered through the tears.

Then the vomit came. Right there on the rug in the bedroom. Partially digested chop suey spewed onto the shag, along with mushrooms and bits of chicken. There was sweetcorn too, which was weird because he hadn't had any sweetcorn for days.

Well, he thought, *there's always sweetcorn, isn't there? So much for physical evidence*. He tutted. Never mind.

Alex collected up his detective camera and the cleaver, and put them away in the backpack. He thought about cleaning up the sick, then decided, being as his cum was in her, he had pissed earlier, and touched just about everything, there seemed little to no point.

He was probably going to jail for this.

And Hell. He was definitely going to Hell.

Hell would probably come up later, but the police did such a shit job when the body was found three weeks later, that his DNA being absolutely everywhere was missed completely.

And that was how it all began.

C H A P T E R 7

Alex opened the door in the corridor that led to his offices and scooped up the post from behind it. He'd been up north on the Jones case for a week or more. He closed and locked it behind him. He was tired and wasn't planning on seeing anyone else today. He went through into his office, and pushed the door to.

He punched the number into the safe that sat on the floor behind the door and opened it, dropping in the thirty thousand that Jones had paid him for the kid. He charged a lot for kids. Most people wouldn't touch them. But Alex would.

He slammed the safe closed and went to the desk dropping the post down and sitting. He got the half empty bottle of whiskey from the bottom desk drawer, and the single glass that sat in there, and poured himself a healthy shot of the brown liquor. He pressed the button on the old fashioned answer phone and let the messages play through. Most of them were from Jax Sheldon. She was his pimp—for lack of a better term.

Most of Alex's work came from strange sources. The dark web? Yeah, sure, why not? A4 hand written posters in phone boxes? Not so much anymore, but again, yeah. Twitter? That too. But he couldn't keep up with it, so he hired Jax. She was his secretary, probably. He paid her well, and she kept the looney's from him. He picked up a pen and pulled his notepad over to him. Jax would call and leave him the job, the pay, and the serial number she had assigned it. Apparently he needed to be this organised. Then he could call her back with the codes and she could give him the full details of the job.

She had several jobs left over several messages. Someone wanted their wife killed. Someone else wanted their neighbour broken into. Some chick wanted to fuck a dangerous man—he wrote that code down. The last message from Jax was about a guy who wanted help with something called *Kuman Thong*. Sounded weird. Alex was about to delete the message when

Jax said that he should Google it, and that the guy was willing to pay *very well*.

Alex wrote down the code and then deleted the message.

—

"Gross." Alex finished flicking down the Wikipedia page. Then he pressed the print button, and the laser printer sparked to life, spewing pages out to the desk. He picked his phone up and dialled Jax.

"Morning." She sounded chipper as usual. "Whatcha decided on?"

"Good morning. I had a lovely week up the road, thank you. Code F56, and Code O34."

"No surprise there." Jax jotted down the code for the woman who wanted to have sex with a dangerous man. "Did you look up the uh … what was it … Kuman Thong?"

"Yeah. What's the pay?"

"He wants three, and …" There was a flicking of papers. "… he's willing to drop seven thousand on each one."

"Doesn't seem like much. Look, I couldn't get much information from the Internet. How old do they need to be?"

"From what I could gather from the client, between four and five months."

Alex nodded, scribbling it down. "And the gold coating? Is that an expense?"

"Sure to be. Do you want his number?"

"Yeah, okay. And the other one."

Jax gave him the two names and the two numbers. Alex wrote them down and politely got rid of Jax. She was good at her job and thoroughly professional, and sometimes Alex didn't want that. Sometimes he wanted a chat. He knocked back the rest of the glass of whiskey and then topped it up. It was only nine in the morning, but who gave a fuck? When you were dealing with people like this, being half cut first thing in the morning wasn't such a bad thing. He looked at the two numbers. He wanted to call the

woman first and find out how she wanted this *dangerous man thing* played out, but he knew that if he went down that rabbit hole first he was unlikely to emerge for a week, and the other job was going to pay more. Especially after he'd negotiated a new price.

He took a deep breath and dialled the man's number.

"Hello?" The man sounded Asian, which wasn't really a surprise, given the name Jax had him write down.

"Mr Chaisai?"

"It's just Chaisai. I take it this is Alex Cole. You have my request."

"I do. Look, I'll be honest. This is all a little weird. You're going to have to run me through some of the finer points."

"I didn't think it was that complicated, Mr Cole. I want three four month old human foetuses emblazoned in gold."

"Yeah. You see, that's the thing. According to my research they need to be cooked, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay. And fresh?"

"Yes."

"And covered in gold."

"Yes."

"For twenty one thousand."

"Yes."

Alex looked at the woman's number and wished he'd called that one instead. "Human," he muttered to himself. "I need eleven thousand for each kid. You know, if you want me cutting these things outta people, that's going to cost." The line went quiet. He had Chaisai on the ropes. "And then there's the cost of the gold …" he let the words hang in the air.

"Eleven. No expenses."

Alex tapped his pen on the desk. "Okay. I'm in. But I gotta ask, what the fuck do you want them for?"

"The ritual using the golden sacrifice is ancient and legendary. It is for the black arts, Mr Cole. That is all you need to know."

"Okay, fine. I'll get on it. I take it that I can refrigerate them once they are … prepared? And you'll want all three together?"

"Yes, Mr Cole."

"Okay. I'll take this one as cash on delivery, given that I want to keep as much distance between me and you as is humanly possible right now. Please be aware though, that in this business my word is my contract, and should you break contract from this conversation onwards, there will be fatal ramifications."

"I understand, Mr Cole. I look forward to your call once you have the merchandise." Chaisai ended the call.

Merch. Wow. Even Alex was surprised at the coldness. Still, he'd been asked to do worse. But not much. This was new, at least. *Cuttin' babies outta mothers*. He picked up the phone and dialled the woman's number. Take his mind off this job for a few minutes.

"Yes?" She sounded horny already and Alex hadn't spoken yet.

"Miss Donna Philips?"

"Missus. Yes, that's me." She huffed the words out like a phone sex operator.

"My name is Cole. I believe you spoke with my colleague, Jax? You were looking for a service."

"Well, I've never heard it called that before." She giggled. This was going to be easy money. "I want a real man, for a change, and you seemed to be right up my alley, so to speak."

Alex nodded. "Indeed. I've got to clear up a couple of the details though. I assume that you're going to need me to produce some evidence that I am a *dangerous man*, as you put it?"

"I'll leave that up to you. The more dangerous you are, the better time you'll have."

Alex wrote *take a foetus* next to her name and underlined it. "And you didn't discuss payment terms with my colleague."

“What are you worth, Mr Cole?”

“Every penny.” He smiled to himself. “But you’re married right? Look I’m not going to charge extra for the evidence that you’re asking for, but if there is a likelihood that I’m going to get entangled with a pissed off husband, I’m going to need insurance.”

“I’m a widow, Mr Cole. You have nothing to worry about, except bringing your a-game.”

“Huh.” Cole scribbled down some numbers. “Where about are you?”

“London. I’d like you at my place, so that I can feel safe.”

“Seems reasonable.” He sketched down travel, time, effort. Then he ran a line through effort. He probably shouldn’t charge for that. “How does a thousand sound? Let’s call it a new customer deal.”

The woman thought for a second and then agreed. “Not a problem, Mr Cole. I’m eager to move forward. When are you available?”

Alex looked at the map of the country pinned to the corkboard on the wall. He just needed to get the evidence first. If he got the first foetus from London, clean it up, maybe cook it? Then … “How about I give you a call in a couple of days? Do you need notice?”

“Oh no, Mr Cole.”

“Call me Alex. I’ll speak to you soon.”

C H A P T E R 8

Alex sat in the flat he'd rented under the name *Ronnie Driscol*. It was a name he'd used before, he already had the IDs and everything, so it was an easy base to make in London for a week. He was watching the TV. Smith had reported his son missing and his wife had been found dead. Everything seemed to be going to plan. He left the flat at about nine in the morning, wanting to miss the heavy traffic, and driving to the nearest hospital—one with a maternity wing.

He sat in the car park—rental car, obviously—and watched the mothers come and go. He was trying to work out how he could tell the age of the babies by sight. He needed a label. Or a baseline. Something. Some of the bumps were huge—probably babies ready to drop—some barely showed—too young—or was it that some babies were fat? Alex shook his head and got out of the car. He wandered around the car park for some time wishing he had never given up smoking.

He supposed he should approach one of the women and strike up a conversation. He could do that. He watched a woman waddle from her car towards the building. The only thing was, that he was used to chatting with women with an undertone of sexuality in the conversation. Surely these women wouldn't want that? *Oh my God*, he thought. He'd forgotten how to speak to women without flirting with them.

A woman with a mid-sized bulge came out of the front door and staggered over to a covered waiting area. Probably the old smoking shack, before they'd made it illegal to smoke on hospital premises. She looked exhausted. Alex walked over to her and sat next to her. "You okay?" he asked. He stared straight ahead, the likelihood of him flirting was lower if he didn't look her in the eyes.

"Yeah," she said. She patted the side of her stomach. "This little fucker keeps giving me a kicking, is all." She laughed. "Excuse my French," she said.

Alex joined in with the laugh. “Don’t worry about that. How old is the little fucker?”

“Five months,” she said.

Fucking hell. A stroke of luck. And he now knew that babies were kicking at that age. Foetuses. Whatever. The more you know, right? The woman started to her feet. “Can I help?” he asked.

“You’re okay. I’m just going to the bus stop.” She held her weight on the seat.

Alex got up, and held her arm, taking her weight on that side of her body. “You can’t get a bus in this state. Why don’t you let me give you a lift?”

The woman looked at him. He could see part of her wanted to say yes, but the other part was sure he was a serial killer. “I’ve just dropped my sister off, and she won’t be ready for hours,” he lied. “I can give you a lift home—you’d be there in no time.”

She smiled slightly.

“Come on, I don’t bite,” Alex said, standing. He introduced himself as Ronnie, and she responded. Her name was Ashley. Alex helped her over to the car and got her in. He chosen a mid-sized family car from the rental place. It seemed like a reasonable choice at the time, and now, as he fell further into his character, it seemed perfect. He tried not to get too handsy with her as he helped her in. This had to be her first kid, based on how little free movement she seemed to have, and how much she moaned and groaned about everything. Getting her in, he managed to get more of a handle on the sort of woman she was. She was young—twenty-five-ish—and more cute than pretty. She was wearing oversized clothes, and between that and the bump it was hard to tell what her natural physique was like. She started to struggle to put the belt around her as he closed the door.

Alex went around to the driver’s side. He couldn’t believe his luck this early into the game. He jumped in, and turned the engine on, pushing the *On* button on the GPS. “Where are we heading?” he asked. His excitement had him a little flustered.

"I thought I was the pregnant one," she said. She beamed at him, and Alex felt a small pang of attraction. It was true what they said—she *was* glowing.

"Heh." He did his best to get himself together. "Gotcha."

"Station Road," she said. "SE24."

Alex punched in the postcode and drove out of the hospital. The voice on the machine told him where to go, and just followed it, blindly. Ashley would let him know if he was going the wrong way. It was only a couple of miles away, anyway. *Great*. "So …" Alex struggled to find a suitable question to ask. He should know this. Damn it. He hadn't done his homework properly. He could have kicked himself. He was *supposed* to have a pregnant sister. "… finding it hard around the home?" It was shit, but it was something.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, my mum tries to help where she can, but she's not always there." She stared out the window. "I would be nice to have a hand every now and again."

"It must be difficult."

"I could have done with a husband."

Alex could hear the pout in her voice. "Sorry," he said. "I don't mean to pry."

"It's fine." She rubbed her belly. "One night stand, and he didn't want anything to do with the little fucker. I mean, what a prick."

Alex smiled to himself. "Nearly there," he said, watching the GPS. He pulled off the main road and into a one way street.

"Down here on the left," she said, like he was taxi driver.

Alex pulled into a narrow space. The houses were terraced. The road was narrow. He was going to have to be quiet. He wasn't expecting to get his first like this. It was like mana from Heaven. He popped off his seatbelt and got out the car, going around to her side and opening the door.

Like a real gent.

She struggled out and Alex tried his best to help without being too grabby. He didn't want her to get any creep vibes from him. She smiled at

him, as he took her hand, helping her across the curb. “I don’t suppose you have time for a coffee?” she asked. “To say thank you.”

Alex glanced at his watch and nodded. “It would be an honour.”

C H A P T E R 9

Alex sat at the dining table in the kitchen while Ashley made tea. Bags in cups, he noted. The table had one of those plastic table cloths on it—like you would have for a kids fucking party. It went with everything else he'd seen. She was broke. That was clear. The décor in the house was pretty worn, the carpet was damaged in a couple of places. It stank of being a rental. The landlord must be a right cunt too, treating a pregnant woman with this level of disrespect. Her furniture all looked second hand, and not second hand in the *I bought it from a reputable purveyor*, sort of way, and more *hand me downs from neighbours*, sort of way. The cups were chipped. She was talking away about nothing in particular, which was just as well, because Alex wasn't really listening. He was too busy *detectiving*.

She turned and put the tea down in front of him. It was milky. Weak as shit, and she'd already taken the bag out. What the fuck? Deep in Alex's stomach anger stirred. The cheek of inviting him in to give him piss-tea. "So you live alone?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yep." She sat down at the table opposite him. "Just me and LF. I've got the council paying the rent, and it's a two bed, so while it's just me and him, we've got plenty of space."

"Him?"

"Yeah. I wanted to know. I started to paint his bedroom blue, but I got bored and it's only half done."

Alex nodded. "Mind if I see it?" He glanced around pretending to be embarrassed. "I'm just looking for ideas. I've been trying with my …" He wasn't wearing a wedding ring. "… partner."

Ashley smiled. "Of course." She pointed at the ceiling. "You don't mind if I don't show you?" She rested her hands on her belly. "He's heavy."

Alex smiled and got up from the chair. "Not at all. Where am I going?"

"First door on the left."

Alex nodded, left the kitchen and went up the stairs. There were only two doors at the top. The bathroom must have been downstairs somewhere. He pushed the door on the right open and looked into Ashley's bedroom. Small. Double bed, unmade. Clothes all over the floor. Not only did she live alone, she didn't have a lot of company. Even better. There was less chance of someone coming around without warning. He pushed the door on the left open and stuck his face in. Yes. Blue. Half painted. He went back downstairs. Returning to the kitchen he noted that there was a door out the back of the kitchen which must be the bathroom, and he looked out the window into the back garden. It was a small space. Patch of grass, and a small shed. It was more of a yard.

Ashley was smiling at him.

Alex thought she might have just been glad of the company. He let his gaze drift around the kitchen, taking in his surroundings without looking like he was inspecting her stuff. There were one or two handy items. He eyed the cooker. It looked pretty clean, if not a bit shit. At least that was something.

"So are you happy?" Ashley suddenly asked.

Alex looked at her, surprised. He sat back down and picked up his tea. "Um … yeah?" He squinted at her. "Why do you ask?"

"It just that …" She picked up the spoon that was sitting next to her mug. "… well, it seems strange for a man to want to help me out of the goodness of his heart. I just thought that you might …" Her words drifted off. "… Silly, really." She looked down at herself, and patted the bulge again. She sniffed up some snot.

She was crying.

"What?" Alex was taken aback. "I-I didn't realise. I'm sorry."

"No," she said. "I know I'm fat and ugly now." She tossed the spoon on the table. "You probably want to go. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking stupid."

"Don't be silly." Alex stood up and went around the table to her. He crouched next to her and took her hand. "Believe me, you've still got it. You are one sexy lady, and you don't think otherwise, you hear me?"

She looked at him and started to lean in to kiss him. Alex responded. He pushed his lips against hers, raising his hand to her cheek and wiping away the tears. Staring into her eyes he pulled away. The spark was back. The one he'd seen in the car, but missed the meaning. He stood back up and went around behind her, massaging her shoulders. "It can't be easy," he said. "You must be lonely. Desperate, to want a wreck like me."

She tried to look around to his face. "Not at all. I … wanted you as soon as I saw you." She giggled coquettishly.

Alex kept one hand on her shoulder and reached over to the counter with the other, unseen by Ashley. He picked up the toaster. *Urg*. It was all greasy. Fuck. Who uses a greasy toaster? It's a fucking fire hazard. He raised it above his head and smacked it down as hard as he could on the top of Ashley's head. There was a thud and small spray of blood as her skull cracked under the force. He raised it back up for a second hit, letting go of her shoulder, but she flopped, forehead first onto the table. Alex pushed his fore and middle fingers into her neck and felt a pulse. She was still alive. Shit. He raised her head off the table, lifting it by her hair and took the cable of the toaster, wrapping it around her neck. She muttered and moaned a little, drifting between unconsciousness and awake as Alex pulled the cable taut and throttled the air from her. She didn't fight or scream. She just slumped, half-blacked out before he started, and gone in seconds.

Alex kept it pulled tight for a minute before releasing her and feeling for a pulse again. She was dead. Alex put the toaster back on the counter and wiped his greasy fingers down his coat. He pulled her chair away from the table and her corpse plunged to the floor. There was a hollow thud as her head hit the dirty tiles. Alex pulled the chair and table to the side of the room and pulled the window blinds down. There were no overlooking houses behind, but it would be just his luck for some nosey fucking neighbour to burst into the garden looking for a cup of sugar. He looked at the sugar bowl on the table. It had coffee grains—he hoped—mixed into the white stuff. *Good luck with that*, he thought. *Anyway*. He pulled her out flat on the floor by her feet. Alex stared at her belly.

He wondered how long the little fucker lived for after she was dead.

Alex worked his way around the drawers in the kitchen. He found a long bladed knife. That might do. He had tools in the car, but if he could avoid coming and going that would be safest. He just didn't want to be seen too many times. He took the blade, and got to his knees on the floor, spreading Ashley's legs and getting between them. He pulled her skirt tight and slid the blade through the fabric, slicing it open. It worked, but the blade was dull as fuck. He pushed her open skirt to the side, and slid the blade between her skin and her panties, pulled the blade towards himself and cut through the fabric. He pulled them from her body and sniffed at them, before tossing them to the corner. She smelled sweet. He wondered if that was her, or if it was because she expecting. He looked at her pussy. It looked like it was neatly shaved in the past, but it was growing back in. She probably couldn't reach it. He let himself look up her body. From this angle it was like he was worshipping her. Another time, another place, she would be tied to the bed, and he would be about to lick her to orgasm. He crawled up her a little to get a better angle, and he cut her oversized jumper from her. Then the t-shirt underneath—it was pulled tight across the bump. He pushed all her clothing from her and had access to the belly now.

Alex looked at her tits, hidden beneath a bra. It used to be white. It looked sort of clean, but had stains. He slid the knife under it and cut through the material. She was nude now, apart from the rags wrapped around her arms. Alex let his hand touch her breast. They were tight, bigger because of the pregnancy, perhaps. She had puffy nipples. He liked that. It would have been good for the kid.

Probably.

He pulled his attention back to her stomach. The plan was simple. Get the foetus out. He looked at the bulge, then the knife. He didn't want to puncture the baby and have to get a replacement. *Right. Think logically. Think like a handyman*. What was the easiest way in? Start with a hole? That was right. If she was a lump of wood, he'd drill a hole in her to get started.

Ah-ha.

Alex scooted down her body and lay almost flat between her legs, his face inches from her slit. He brought the knife up to her gash and slid it in, slowly. After he had the knife in a couple of inches, he pulled the knife upwards and started a sawing motion, trying to use the knife to open her up like a loaf of bread.

It seemed like a solid idea, but in practice, Alex was sawing against moist flesh and getting nowhere at all. All he seemed to have achieved was turning her cunt into chopped beef. "Fuck it," he shouted, yanking the blade out and chucking it across the kitchen against the front of the fridge. "Stupid poor bitch and your blunt fucking knife." He got up and slammed his hands down flat on the draining board, staring out the window.

"Ah," he blurted out, suddenly.

Alex unlocked the back door and stormed across the grass to the shed, swinging the door open. He looked around the sparse contents. "Of course," he said, standing on the shittest lawnmower he'd ever seen and reaching across. "Everyone's got some, and no one knows why." He pulled a rusted pair of hedge shears from a nail in the wall. He made the traditional dad manoeuvre and opened and closed them twice in quick succession, with them getting easier to close on the second time. They made the snip, *crack* sound to Alex's pleasure. "Great," he said, genuinely pleased with himself.

He returned to the house and closed the back door, getting back on the floor between her legs. He opened the shears and slid one blade up her fanny, and rested the other on her pubes. He wrangled it around a bit so that he didn't need to cut through the bone.

He was glad she was already dead, because she seemed nice, and he was making all sorts of mess in there, rearranging the furniture, as it were. He took a deep breath, before he ventured onto new ground. He didn't think this was going to happen this way, but what the hell? If it worked, he still needed another two. Practice makes perfect.

Breath held, he slammed the two handles back together.

The two blades slipped through the woman's skin with ease, and he did actually miss all the bone.

Blood squirted from her newly opened belly, leaving Alex to wonder if the ball-shape of the belly was actually full of blood. It sprayed him across his shirt and face, making him look like he'd been bobbing for apples in a maths teachers ink pot. "Well," he said. Alex dropped the shears on the floor and grabbed each side of the belly, parting it like the red sea.

Inside was a formed human baby. It wasn't *finished*, as such. The head was a funny shape and it didn't have fully formed fingers, but it was close. *Cool*. The baby was contained within a sack or some shit, and there were cords and things that Alex vaguely remembered having to sit through in school. He got up and retrieved the knife.

When he got back on his knees he jabbed the end of it through the sack and a clear viscous liquid flowed out over everything, mixing with the blood and other, weird looking fluids that he'd discovered inside Ashley.

There, kneeling in a pool of bodily fluids, Alex reached down and retrieved the child from the sack, lifting it carefully, trying not to break it. Like it was a mint action figure.

Then the little fucker moved.

The sight of the baby voluntarily moving it's arm—more than likely it's death throe—made Alex drop it to the floor. It made a splooping sound because it was wet, bloody, slimy, and not particularly solid. "Jesus fucking Christ," he yelped, backing away. It didn't move again.

Alex nudged the little corpse with his shoe.

"Fuck."

He picked up the knife and managed—with some effort—to saw the umbilical cord away, and release little baby *LF* from his imprisonment.

Then he ran it under the tap washing the goo off. Bits of the inside of Ashley wetly plopped into the bottom of the sink. He lay the baby corpse on the draining board. Alex leaned down in front of the cooker. "Well," he muttered. "It would save time." He ran his finger along the knobs on the front and turned the oven onto fan. *Fan would work, right?* He looked at the child. Fuck.

Alex got his phone out and pulled up Google. He searched for *cooking time bone in shoulder of pork*. He couldn't actually search for what he was really looking for, now could he? The recipe he pulled up suggested some cooking times based on weight. He looked around the kitchen. Of course this poor arse drop-out didn't have any scales. He picked up the foetus and bobbed it up and down in his hand like he was Indiana fucking Jones. "Five hundred grams?" he muttered to himself. He was just guessing. He had no idea. He looked down the instructions.

An hour with guaranteed crackling. Fine.

His eyes drifted over to the salt and pepper pots on the table—the only herbs and spices this house had ever likely seen, then he shook his head. It's not like he was actually going to eat the thing, now was it? He rummaged around in the cupboards and found a shitty metal tray.

He oiled it, and popped the kid in the oven.

C H A P T E R 1 0

Alex sat in Ashley's kitchen wearing nothing but his pants. He was fresh out the shower and watching the tumble dryer go around. The flavour of the foetus had filled the kitchen. It smelt a little like roasting, but bland. Unflavoured. But hey, he wasn't being paid to be a professional chef now, was he?

The dryer stopped and he pulled his shirt and trousers out, now free from Ashley goo. He slipped the warm clothing back on and looked at his watch. The baby roast should be finished soon. He dialled Donna Philips.

"Hello?" She sounded as sexy and sultry as she had on the phone the other day.

"Mrs Philips. Alex Cole. I was wondering if you'd be available?" Alex stood and pushed the phone under his chin, took a pair of oven gloves and took the tray with the baby on it from the oven. He hoped that Chaisai wanted it crispy. He assumed, being as he still had to *emblazon it with gold* that whatever it was for, it wasn't for eating. He probably should look that up tonight, when he'd finished for the day.

"I am," she replied. "Well, I can be. I'm in Knightsbridge, when would you like to come?"

Knightsbridge? Fancy. "I'm just the other side of the river, I can be there in say, an hour?"

"Fine." Donna gave him the address. "And don't forget your evidence," she said. He could hear the humour in her voice, but looked at the foetus. Ah well. What was the worst thing that could happen?

"I'll see you in an hour." Alex ended the call. He started going through the cupboard, hoping in vain to find a silver platter and cloche. Fat fucking chance. He ended up with a Tupperware box and lid that didn't match. He stuffed the bottom of it with kitchen towels and put the corpse on top, before covering it with more towels and then snapping the lid in place.

He left Ashley where she was on the floor of the kitchen, the pools of blood around her drying onto the tiles because of the heat in the kitchen. He left the cooker on low. The ambient heat in the room would distort the time of death. There was no way he was going to be able to hide the motive—he glanced at the lunch boxed baby—but he should get away with it.

Alex left, placing the Tupperware in the foot well of the passenger seat and pumping Philips' address into the GPS.

Fifteen minutes later he was on Lambeth Bridge, heading into the far more expensive side of the smoke. Across the bridge and into the nicer part of town, Alex parked up the side of the small park opposite the address he'd been given. He looked less likely to get a ticket there. Not that this was going to take that long.

Easy money.

He took the lunch box and strolled over to the houses. They were tall. Eleventh Century. Million pound flats and houses. Some of the most expensive properties in the world. And there he was. Shabby detective, shabbying down the road. Dead baby in a lunch box. How teenage him would laugh if he could see himself now.

Or not.

He climbed the steps to the front door. The address Philips had given him was a house. He rang the bell.

C H A P T E R 1 1

When the woman answered the door, Alex doubted that she could be Philips. She was a widow, and this woman was barely a kid. Maybe it was her daughter? "I'm here to see Mrs Donna Philips," he said, looking past her into the house.

"Mr Cole," she said. He recognised her voice immediately.

Alex raised an eyebrow. "May I?" he gestured into the house. He wanted to get himself and the lunch box off the street. Especially in an area like this. Philips turned and walked away, down the hallway, leaving the door open for him. Alex watched her for a few seconds, his mind taken from getting off the street. She was wearing a pencil dress. Her hips wiggled like she was on the catwalk. Her hair was long. Black as the ace of spades. She had high cheek bones, and a perfect nose. Her legs were long, covered in some shear stockings. High heels. She was obviously somewhere in her early twenties, but she had an air about her of someone far more experienced. She exuded style and sophistication, money, and grace.

Something wasn't right, that was for sure. This chick could have anyone. *Anyone*. What the fuck would she be paying for a bum like Cole for? The detective in him told him to leave. He glanced down the street towards the park. He could be in the car and away in seconds. The dick part of him wanted to go in and see where it led.

He tried to justify it in his head. *Maybe she was just looking for a bit of rough?* Alex looked from the lunch box to the arse, slowly disappearing to the end of the hallway. He stepped in and closed the door behind him.

—

Philips stood at the end of the hallway and beckoned Alex forward, curling her forefinger over like she was scratching the chin of a cat. She didn't speak. Alex walked along the corridor admiring the cost of the place. The house alone was probably in excess of twenty-mil. There were oils on the

walls, pictures of people that looked wealthy. Philips must have come from that side of the family, because the resemblance in the paints to her was strong. As he got closer, he said, “Alex, please. No need to be formal.”

Philips smiled. “Donna,” she said. “Please come in.”

Alex handed her the lunch box. “Evidence, as requested. I’ll need it back though.”

Donna nodded, taking the box. Alex went over to the sofa and sat. He felt dirty in the room. He felt cheap. Everything in there, the bookcase, the wing-backed chairs, a glass topped coffee table with this month’s Home and Country on it, was expensive. The room smelt like money. She slunk over to the chair opposite him and perched on the edge of it, keeping her knees together, proper lady-like. She popped the top of the lunch box off and placed the lid down on the arm of the chair. Moving the kitchen towel to one side she raised an eyebrow and smiled. She looked at him and cocked her head. “Takeaway,” she said.

Alex was unsure if she knew what it was or not.

“I won’t bother asking for the details of why, as I’m sure you are far too professional to divulge, but *why is there a dead baby in this lunch box*, does sound a little like an opening to a joke.”

“No joke, I assure you.” Alex smiled. “But as my client, can I just ask one question?”

“Shoot.” She smiled. The word was unbefitting of her.

“Why? Why on earth do you want to bed me? I mean, I get that you didn’t necessarily know what I looked like until only a moment ago, must you must have known you were running the risk of a schlub.”

“You can see what I have, Alex. You can see that I want for nothing. Is there anything wrong with asking for something that so few have had?”

“I’m not a virgin, you know.”

Donna smiled. She replaced the lid to the lunch box and placed it down on the coffee table. “No, I’m sure you’re not.” She reached down to the base of the bookcase next to her and withdrew a large sum of cash, placing

it on top of the box. “Just in case you might think I don’t have the agreed figure.”

Alex looked around the place. “Yeah. Big danger of that.” He glanced at the cash. “So how do you want to do this?”

C H A P T E R 1 2

Alex followed her up to the second storey of the house. He carefully eyed the stairs leading to the next floor up. The house was narrow—as was the design at the time, but deep. The stairwell led up the left side of the house, the doors to the rooms on the right. High ceilings. Ornate décor ran around the fittings, lights, and such. There was a chandelier in one room. Donna walked into the first room on the right, holding the door open for him.

Alex wished he'd had the foresight to pick the cash up and pocket it before following her. He looked around the room quickly before crossing the threshold. It was a bedroom … of sorts. It certainly wasn't like anything he'd seen before.

The room was large, and square. In the centre of the wall was a bed—super king, at least. It was dressed in deep red—satin judging by the glisten in the light. The walls were dark—burgundy, probably. Alex shrugged at the thought. He wasn't an interior designer. Aside from that, the room was bereft of furniture. No wardrobes. Nothing. He stepped in. The carpet was lush, thick, and warm.

He noted a mirror on the ceiling above the bed.

Very tasteful.

Donna went to the oversized windows and drew the curtains almost to a close, before slinking across to Alex's side and turning the dimmer on, breathing a warm sensual light into the room. He nodded. "Very nice," he said quietly. She stood there next to him, breathing slowly. He could feel her warmth. "Where do you want me?" He smiled, turning to her. He assumed that she wanted him to be a dangerous man in the bedroom too. He couldn't help but feel a little silly, role playing as himself. Alex put his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her lips to his, kissing her hard. He felt her hand cup his balls. That, he wasn't expecting. He drew back and found her gently biting his lip. They stared into each other's eyes for a few seconds without words, before she released him.

"I want to fuck you," she whispered.

"Okay." Alex pulled his jacket off and dropped it to the floor behind him. He stuck his finger down the back of his tie and pulled it loose, but she put her hand on top of his, stopping him.

"Slow down," she said. Donna slid her fingers across the stubble he hadn't bothered to shave off today. He raised an eyebrow, if she wanted to be in charge, sure. Why not? She took Alex by the hand and led him to the edge of the bed. He let her. That was where she pulled his tie from him. She unbuttoned his shirt, slowly, all the while he watched her. She looked like she had undressed a man a thousand times. A pretty impressive feat for someone so young.

Unless she was a hooker, but that didn't make any sense.

She pulled his shirt over his shoulders and down, releasing him from it. He still resisted the urge to move. He wanted to grab her and throw her on the bed. He wanted to rip that fucking dress from her and fuck her hard. She unhooked his belt buckle. "Tell me how many men you've killed," she whispered.

Surprised, Alex muttered, "Uhh …"

"Is it many?" Her fingers slipped into the front of his loosened trousers and found his cock, sliding it between them.

"Yes," he said, slightly too high pitched.

"Good," she said. Donna slipped her hands out and undid his trousers, pulling them down and releasing his cock. It strained inside his pants. "I see that you're excited."

"Yeah," he said. He reached to touch her and she brushed him away.

Her hand went inside his pants and she stroked him. He was fully erect now. If she was expecting some Don Juan performance out of him, she was going about it the wrong way. "Easy," he muttered. "That's dangerous. You don't want it going off."

She laughed. He hadn't meant for it to be a joke.

Donna yanked his pants down past his erection and then pushed him back onto the bed. He lay there, watching her. Fine. If she wanted to be in charge. "Up," she barked. She gestured to the top of the bed where Alex

saw restraints for each of his hands. So it was like that, was it? He shuffled up the bed trying his best to be seductive, but probably failing miserably. Donna rolled her pencil dress up to her thighs, allowing her more free movement with her legs. Alex could see the clasps of her suspenders. Nothing higher.

Alex throbbed. He wanted in.

She straddled across him and took his left hand tying it tightly, giving it a hard pull to ensure the knot she used was inescapable. Then she did the same with his other hand. Alex just lay there. She was physically perfect, and he was living the dream. Why try to fight it? As soon as he was tied down, she got off him and stood next to the bed. She grinned at his cock. He was glad she liked it.

Then she turned and started out of the room.

"Uh, excuse me?" Alex said.

She turned and put her index finger to her lips. "One moment," she said, leaving the room.

Alex didn't like it. He looked at the knots on the ties. They were pretty solid knots. Maybe she'd been a sailor in a previous life. Urg. *Don't even think about that*. He looked at the bedpost he was tied to. That looked pretty weak, to be honest. There was some noise at the door and Donna returned. His cock responded by flexing. Nice to see the little fella was paying attention. She walked over to him and immediately took it in her hand, stroking him back to fully erect. Then she placed a small dish under the head of it. A Petri dish. "And … that's for?" he asked.

"Just don't think about it," she said. She started to stroke him with a little more vigour, playing for an end game, rather than looking for some fun.

"What the fuck?" He was exasperated.

"Come on," she shouted. The door was pushed fully open and two more women came in. One of them was wearing leather. A long coat. More vampire hunter than mistress, Alex thought. The other was decked out in lacy shit.

“Look,” he said. “There’s plenty to go around, but …” he motioned with his head to his … head. “… you need to ease up on this, or it’s all going to be over before it’s started.” The other two women busied themselves. One of them carried in a small folding table and the other something that looked like a pestle and mortar. They put it all together at the end of the bed and draped a red cloth over the table. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Are you going to cum for me?” Donna asked.

Alex looked at his cock. “Well, probably, yes.” He answered honestly. He was struggling to see another outcome at this point.

“Good.” She wanked him quicker.

“Oh, Jesus.” He didn’t know what was going on, but Alex felt that at this stage, giving them what they wanted was probably a bad idea.

“Is he nearly ready?” asked the one in leather.

“He is resisting, but yes,” Donna replied.

“Good.” Leather left the room again, leaving Lace standing there with a wooden box about the size of a ruler. Alex focussed on it. It was getting harder not to finish. She placed the box down and opened it, pulling out a blade. It was about a foot long, and curved. It looked antique and Turkish.

“What are you going to do with that?” he asked.

C H A P T E R 1 3

Lace placed the knife down and smiled at Alex. “Don’t worry. You have your own job to do.” She came to the other side of the bed opposite Donna and poured herself onto the sheets. She ran her hands over his chest. “Why don’t you let yourself go?” she whispered. “If you’re really good, you can fuck us all later. Would you like that?”

Alex looked at her as she spoke. Yes. Yes he would like that. All three of the women were perfect. They were fucking Goddesses. And this all stank. *What was going on?* “Nah,” he blurted.

“Oh please,” she said, her voice turned to a whine. “Please let us fuck you. Over and over. We’ll be good. I promise.”

The begging did it.

Alex couldn’t hold out any longer and streamed Alex juice into the dish. He grunted and flexed, and Donna stopped after a few strokes, getting out what she needed. He was *so* confused. Donna grinned at him. “See,” she said. “Wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“You should say that from here.” Alex looked between the two women. He watched Donna take the dish and place it on the table at the end of the bed. “You want to give me a heads up now?”

Leather returned to the room. She was carrying a cage. She brought it to the end of the bed and placed it on the floor. Alex couldn’t see, but he heard her open the cage and gently remove something. This was getting worse. It was going to be a snake, wasn’t it? Alex watched her with trepidation as she stood, holding the cutest fucking white rabbit he’d ever seen. “Aww,” he said. It looked at him with big red eyes, chewing on something.

Lace got up from the bed and went around to the table. She lifted a bowl onto it, and then joined Leather and the rabbit. She booped its nose. Donna got up from the bed and started to unzip her dress. “What … now?” Alex asked. “You could have done that a few minutes ago. It would have helped.”

"Would it now?" she asked. Donna dropped the dress to her side, and Alex could see her for the first time. Underneath the dress she was naked apart from stockings and suspenders, her firm round breasts hung beautifully, and perky, and there was a mouth stretching from where her cunt should have been across her stomach and finished between the base of her tits. The mouth was on its side and after gaining sudden freedom it opened and closed, stretching. When it was open, Alex could see rows of teeth, malformed, broken, and between them squirmed a thousand unholy tongues, pushing globules of thick gelatinous drool around. "Does it make you hard, lover?" Donna asked.

"What the living fuck is that?" Alex screamed. "What are you?"

Donna smiled—with her human mouth. Well, the mouth on her face, anyway. She looked to Leather and Lace. "Ready?" she asked. Leather nodded, and Lace picked up the knife with a grin.

Leather was still holding the rabbit.

"No," Alex whispered. "Come on. What the fuck?"

Leather held the ears of the bunny in one hand and the feet of it with the other and stretched it out, while Lace took the dagger and stuck it into the creature at about the point its genitals would have been. Leather held the thing as it squirmed and fought against her grip, manoeuvring it over the bowl. Lace started a sawing action with the blade, pulling it up the belly of the creature, cutting it up like a steak. Alex had never heard the death screams of a rabbit before. He had always assumed that rabbits only made little mewling sounds like sleeping kittens. Maybe it was a hole in his knowledge base—of which he was running out of time to fill. He looked at the ties again, still unsure what the plan with him was.

And trying to ignore the not-human thing standing next to the bed.

As the blood squirted from the rabbit, its guts and bits of half-digested carrot spewed out into the bowl, the rabbit howled. It was the single most distressing thing that Alex had ever witnessed—a trophy held by the death throe of one particular woman in Norwich some years ago, but that was a different story—before today. Now, it was the Norwich woman, the rabbit screaming, and Donna, the not-human thing with the gaping mouth. Leather

and Lace drained the rabbit as it squirmed its last, ensuring the deep thick juices flowed into the bowl. Then Leather discarded it to the table.

Donna watched the whole gruesome event while running her fingers sensually around the lips of the mouth in her stomach with one hand, while the other wandered gently over what may or may not have passed for a vagina. It was hard to tell from Alex's current perspective.

Alex wrapped the binds around his wrists and gripped them tightly in his fists.

Leather picked up the bowl, and her and Lace stepped back from the confines of the bed out into the space between the end of it and the wall. Donna went over to the two of them.

"What's going on?" Alex asked.

Donna waved over to him dismissively. "Don't worry. We'll get to you."

Fuck.

Lace stood, holding the bowl, and Leather dipped her hands into the warm liquid, making it overflow. The blood drooled over the top and leached down the side of the container. Donna gave a sharp intake of breath when it did, like she was getting some sexual satisfaction from seeing rabbit nectar flowing. Maybe she was? Leather withdrew her hands, reddened with the thick rabbit blood, bits of intestine and offal sticking to her flesh, and she started to paint the blood over the naked body of Donna. She dipped and painted across Donna's shoulders, masking her in gloop, working her way around methodically. Then she dipped into the blood again and cupped her hands, lifting some blood over to Donna, dribbling it over her breasts, as Donna shuddered.

Alex felt his cock twitch.

Jesus fucking Christ. Not now.

Donna notice and chuckled. "Well," she said as Leather massaged the sticky red liquid into her beautiful, plump tits. "We are *dangerous*."

Alex looked down himself and he'd gone from dead-rabbit-flaccid, to half-mast. He smiled to himself and then shook his head back to the place it

should be. Tied to the bed and almost guaranteed to die.

The unholy tongues were lapping out of the gash of a mouth, slurping at the vile liquid dribbling down Donna's flesh, lapping up the goodness, and as the lips reddened with blood, the mouth seemed to smile. Donna's flesh was glistening with some out-world like beauty as it rippled under the blood, and she held her head back now, flexing her whole body in orgasm.

Alex was hard at the sight, and didn't care. It was the most bizarrely erotic thing. Ever.

Donna screamed in pleasure, Alex looking around the room. Boner or not, he needed a get out clause in this contract. The mouth chuckled, obviously feeling the things Donna could. It sounded like Jabba the fucking Hutt cumming. Donna stumbled back, her legs weakening. Alex thought that given the chance he could have done that for her, without the other two women and the blood. And the rabbit. But never mind.

Leather and Lace placed the bowl down and stood subserviently at the end of the bed. Leather's hands were sticky with the blood of the small mammal. Lace's dress was splashed liberally with the blood. Ruined. That was never going to come out.

"He is happy," Donna said. "We are happy. Go. Change," she ordered. The two women nodded in silence and left the room like military personnel.

"You have those two well trained," said Alex.

"I do. They are worthy of being my worshippers."

"About that …" Alex let the words drift into the room. "Any chance you could tell me what's going on?" He nodded at the mouth. "And, I don't know, what the fuck that is?" He tried to remain calm. Composed. Losing his shit wasn't going to get him out of this. Donna perched on the end of the bed. She was gently petting the corpse of the rabbit.

The mouth grunted contentedly. "There are worlds beyond this one, that you will never understand, Mr Cole. I know you said to call you Alex, but I think I might have outstayed the welcome on that one." She smiled, like it was a joke. "Worlds you will never witness. Even knowing what you know now, what you've seen today … once the ritual is complete, this world will

be no more than a serving on a plate for a God you never worshipped, to consume."

"That all sounds like bullshit, love. But if I get your drift, you're ending the world? Yeah?" He glanced over to the petri dish that still sat on the table.

"Close enough, Mr Cole."

That was a turn up. Definitely not the way he thought today was going to go. Alex Cole: helping to end the world. Shit. He briefly considered what Chaisai wanted the Kuman Thong for, and thought that maybe he shouldn't be quite so easy—or cheap—with his complicity. For all he knew, that was two end of the world scenarios he might be actively participating in today alone. *Other worlds, huh? You learn something new every day*. "So what do you call this deity you have in, uh, your tummy hole?"

"You wouldn't be able to pronounce it without me inserting a reed from a clarinet into your vocal cords."

"Okay. Sounds like you've already tried that one. Never mind, eh?" He kept his eyes on her, using the opportunities he had to look around the room. His clothes had gotten kicked over to the wall near the door at some point. They were important—in the big scheme of things—but not a necessity. He looked at the petri dish. That was a different matter. He didn't really want to end the world today. He still had loose ends that needed resolutions.

Like the rest of his life.

C H A P T E R 1 4

Donna stood and walked over to the window. She parted the curtains enough to be able to see out into the street.

"Just taking one last look?" Alex asked.

"Indeed," she replied.

"And what happens to you? I mean, *that* physical presence?"

"I will evolve." She still watched out the window.

Alex pulled the binds holding him tight, and raised his legs. He was trying to be silent. He wasn't as flexible in real life as he was in his mind. He expected to do this in one single, cool motion, but realised mid-manoeuvre that he didn't have the body strength of a young Van Damme. He struggled to pull his feet up over his face, but he managed to get them flat on the wall behind him, eventually. He ended with his arse proudly, nakedly, jutting into the air. Embarrassing? Possibly. Gaining leverage? Definitely. Alex pushed with his feet and pulled his arms, putting all the force on the bedposts that he was tied to.

There was a crack. It was loud enough to pull Donna from whatever thoughts she was having about ending the world or whatever, and she turned. Then the wood gave, freeing Alex from the bed. He flailed about like a beached whale for a second before getting his bearings, and getting upright.

Donna was charging across the room, her tits bouncing like a Benny Hill sketch, and her god-belly-mouth was open, tongues flapping.

Alex was plan-less. And without knowing what the plan was, he struggled to formulate something useful in the thirty nano-seconds he had before Donna was due to crash into him. Her god-maw was open wide enough to take a healthy chunk out of him. Naked him. He still had lumps of broken bedpost tied to his wrists. He flicked them around like nun chucks and landed each post in his hand like a stake. He brought them up like he was a god damned vampire hunter and thrust himself at Donna, wood first.

He spiked the two wooden stakes into the surprised Donna, one in her shoulder and the other into her side on the other side of the god mouth. Both missed the yawning monstrosity by a long way, and for that Alex was happy. She fell backwards, mostly under Alex's weight falling onto her, and the two of them ended on the carpet, Alex on top. The god mouth was between them, but Alex had managed to hold himself up out of the way.

They stared at each other for a second, Alex glad to be alive, and Donna possibly aghast. "You'll have to forgive my wood." Alex winked at her, and rolled off to the side. He sprang to his feet and made for his clothes.

Then he stopped.

He looked at the petri dish.

He still didn't know what they wanted it for—or him, come to that—, but he knew that he didn't want them to have it. He picked it up, as Donna got to her feet. The god mouth was crying out in frustrated confusion, and Donna screamed, "No!" Alex had to get rid of it. Before they got it back and attempted whatever it was they wanted to attempt with his love juice. But what? Where to get rid … of … it.

Aw, fuck. Alex sloshed the dish back, swigging his own spunk into his mouth. Donna screamed and lunged at him, but was too late, as she slammed into him, he discarded the dish to land in the corpse of the rabbit. He swirled the stuff around in his mouth as she tackled him to the ground.

The two of them pushed back and forth, and she managed to get on top, straddling him like she was going to cowgirl him, the god mouth chomping at him, trying to get a bite of something. Something Alex-y and squishy. Donna reached over to the table, picked up the sacrificial knife, and held it up like Van-fucking-Helsing.

Just swallow it. He didn't want to. It was still in his mouth, and if his mind had anything to say about it, that's where it was staying. *But it's yours*, his heart argued back. *No homo*. Alex closed his eyes and swallowed, thinking of England. "*Gaaahhh*, God."

Just as Donna stabbed the knife into his shoulder.

Lucky for Alex she was pretty shit at aiming, not so lucky was that the god mouth had given up waiting for her to deal with him, and it decided to

start doing something itself.

As the two of them were so close, Donna still holding the knife, and her breasts lolling candidly on Alex's chest, the tongues of the god mouth squirmed out of the cavern in Donna's gut and started to probe around the edges of Alex's torso. They were trying to find purchase. Something to hold on to like they were attached to a desperate lover. Alex used his good hand to punch Donna on the side of the head, causing her to release the knife from her grip, but the tongues still wound their way around him.

The knife had gone through his shoulder, but Alex could immediately tell that it had missed all the important stuff, because he could still move his fingers. It wasn't the first time he'd been stabbed. With his good hand, he grabbed the hilt of the blade and yanked it from his body.

The pain ravaged him, causing his legs to coil, both at the same time. It was involuntary but they cracked Donna in the small of the back and caused her to arch herself back. A split second still of the scene would have showed two naked lovers, entwined together, a woman rolling back in the height of orgasm, her man, spent beneath her.

Quite far from the truth, in all told.

Blood was spitting up from the wound in Alex's shoulder, out, over his chest. Onto hers.

He swung the blade at the tongues of the god mouth and hacked at the slick flesh of them. Up close they clagged with gelatinous translucent glue, sticking the tentacle like appendages to anything they came close to. It was a cavalcade of grossness. The knife tore through them, and they squirted black god blood from the parts left attached to the god mouth. Alex rolled, getting Donna beneath him and pulled himself up onto his knees. She was screaming. The god mouth was screaming. The room was filled with a sound that Alex could barely comprehend. A cavern of white noise, shrieking a universe full of sound. *He* screamed, joining the choir of anger and pain. He pulled the knife up and stabbed it into Donna's tit, crashing through her perfect breast, into her torso. She stared wide eyed. Shock? Pain?

Black god blood spewed from the mouth.

Alex rolled off her, and onto the carpet. He got to his knees, and up. Blood ran free from the wound in his chest, he was slathered in god blood, and Donna writhed on the floor, noises emanating from her that were hitherto unheard in the annals of man.

The door opened and Leather and Lace returned. They were both wearing white robes. They looked like they'd joined a fucking convent in the time they'd been gone, but not a holy convent. Maybe a fetish one. Leather—or it could have been Lace, it was hard to tell now—was carrying a silver tray with a gold bowl on it, and Lace—the other one—was carrying a candelabra, ornate, with eight holders, a lit candle in each.

The two of them seemed surprised at the scene. Alex was impressed at how little sound must carry in a house this old. He charged across the room, wielding the knife towards Leather. She dropped the tray with the bowl on it at her feet and out spilled a thick, clear liquid. Over the carpet. Over her. She grabbed his arms, and the two of them fought for supremacy. She was strong. Stronger than Alex, he thought. He pushed her to the side and into Lace, who lost her balance, and dropped the candles.

They fell to the carpet and lit the liquid that had been in the bowl. It was more flammable than petrol, the carpet lighting in an instant, turning the room into a lake of fire. Leather let him go, falling backwards as the flames tore up her legs, blistering her skin with tormenting speed.

Alex punched her with his bad hand as she fell away into the pool of flames. The pain from the stab wound sliced through him as he did, and he cursed himself for not just stabbing the bitch. Lace was on him. She clawed her finger nails down the side of his face, tearing his flesh off like it was no stronger than Christmas wrapping paper. Alex screamed and swung the blade at her, missing. He stumbled backwards, falling over Donna, who was now trying to get to her feet. The god tongues that he'd cut lolled in the mouth but others still licked out at him, trying to reach their prize.

Alex rolled over to the wall and found himself on his trousers. "Fucking hell," he blurted, grabbing one of the legs of them in a solid, if not painful fist. Donna ran at him and grabbed at him, missing and finding herself with the other leg of the trousers.

The two battled in a brief tug of war, one hand each on Alex's trouser legs. Then they gave, the arse ripping out of them, and them becoming two single legs. Alex rolled backwards onto the wall, and Donna fell into the flames, rolling in pain.

The room was hot. The temperature the liquid was burning at was furnace hot. It was like the four of them were trapped in a cremation oven. Alex felt the trousers. He had the pocket with the car keys.

That was something.

He looked across to the open door, out into the hallway, and pushed himself from the wall.

Then Lace came charging through the flames. Her white fetish habit was burning like the sun. The two of them collided, and fell back to the wall. Then she kneed Alex in the nuts. The sickness rose from them as they swelled, and Alex could think of nothing else to do, but head butt the cunt in the face. He slammed his forehead into her nose and she dropped backwards like a potato sack. "Fuck you," Alex whined through the pain. Her legs were on fire, and Alex was pissed.

He dropped across her and stabbed the knife into her gut, hoping she didn't also have a god mouth. The blade plunged into the soft sticky—human—flesh and Alex made a sawing motion, pushing with all his remaining strength across her gut. The red of her blood bloomed across the white of the habit and she screamed without fighting. Alex could feel the flames licking at his back, his skin scorching. He dropped the knife and punched his fist into the slit he'd created in the woman and grabbed whatever he could, yanking it out of her body and discarding it. He crawled from her prone corpse, frozen in death, with her guts plopped on top of her carved open belly.

He staggered to his feet and looked around the room, fires blazing across the carpet. The bed was on fire. His clothes, gone. He looked at the one trouser leg he held in his hand. Pain seared down his back from burns, his shoulder bled, his face throbbed.

"Fuck this," he said, looking over the wall of flames to the door beyond.

C H A P T E R 1 5

Alex stamped out the flames from the sheets of the bed and then covered himself with them. He looked like a shit ghost. He ran at the wall of heat and through. The liquid—whatever it was—burned with a white magnesium light as the flames ripped upwards to the ceiling. It burned so hot the room was melting around him. It tore the skin from his feet as he passed through it.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he yelped as he careened through. He burst onto the landing, coughing his guts up as smoke descended from the ceiling. The house was filling with it. He ran naked down the stairs, still holding onto his trouser leg. He fumbled through the pocket, and pulled the car keys out.

While he always attempted to maintain at least an illusion of anonymity, an air of mystique, he felt like maybe he'd missed the mark on this job. He reached the bottom of the stairs and stalled. He felt like he was missing something.

"Oh fuck," he uttered. He turned the cornered of the bannister and headed to the room at the end of the hallway.

The haunting cry of the god mouth came from upstairs. Alex didn't know if it was a death cry, or if the thing was actually fine, and just really, really, pissed at him. Judging by the day he'd had, probably the latter. Alex ran into the room and grabbed the lunch box and the cash off the coffee table.

Waste not, want not.

He then ran for the front door.

—

He yanked the front door open, lunch box and cash in one hand, car keys in the other, trouser leg draped over his arm. He'd had enough of today, and was about ready for a drink. He stared out of the burning house to the crowd that was forming on the street, looking up as the glass from the floor above was shattering, smoke billowing out into the air.

Naked, burned, and bleeding, Alex could only think of one thing to do. Faced with the elite of Knightsbridge, he quickly took the trouser leg and wrapped it around the lunch box.

He started running.

"Everybody move. *I've got a burned baby here*. There's no time. I need to get to the hospital." Statements of which, mostly were true. The rich, richer, and royal parted like the Red Sea for the naked hero running from a burning building to save a child.

Suckers.

Alex left a trail of blood on the pavement as it let from the burns on his feet. He ran to the corner and around. The fuckers were actually applauding him. Around the side of the park, he pressed the fob, and unlocked the car. He opened the door and chucked the lunch box into the foot well, and got in, starting the engine. He popped the glove box and pulled out his phone, swapping it for the cash.

Pulling away, he followed the one-way system for a minute, driving at break-neck speeds, mostly for the sakes of the onlookers, but once he was nearer The Thames he dropped to a reasonable pace, and sunk down as far into the seat as he could, so that people couldn't see he was shirtless in the car.

He drove for the edge of the City.

No time to play.

He dialled Jax.

"Afternoon," she said. He could *hear* her smile. "I haven't left you any messages. What's up?"

"Job from Donna what's her face—done, fee paid in full. I'll drop your commission to the usual account tonight."

"Cool," she said. "I take it a good time was had by all. I don't know how you do it."

"Yeah," he said, wincing as his foot stuck to the clutch, leaving behind some skin. "I blew my load. Set her whole body on fire. I think I saved the world too."

"With your penis. Yeah."

Alex let the snark in her voice go. "It's all good. But look, if she calls back, no offense, but she was bit weird. Find out what she wants, get her number, but don't agree to anything. This boat's sailed."

"No problem. Mrs Philips is a wacko." Alex could hear her scribbling down a note. "How are you getting on with Human Song?"

"*Kuman Thong*." He glanced at the box sliding about on the floor of the car. "Fine. One down. I should be finished in a couple of days. Can you find out where I can buy something to coat the little fuckers in gold?"

C H A P T E R 1 6

Charming his way into someone's guts wasn't going to work with three deep *cat* scratches down his face. He looked like he'd tried to rape someone in an alleyway and they'd fought back. Having a massive bandage to cover it wasn't exactly appealing either.

So he had to try a change in tact.

Alex stood in full scrubs in Queens Hospital—the largest hospital in a twenty mile radius outside of Ashbury. He didn't want to risk the local one for obvious reasons. It was late evening. The perfect time for him to nose around with little chance of being challenged by anyone. The staff were few and far between and visiting hours were long finished. He was looking at the map of the building. He'd arrived at maternity, but discovered it was a hive of activity.

Obviously it would be, what with it being full of screaming little fuckers.

He left and was now trying to work out what might be the next best thing, when his eyes fell on a different department. It was thin, but there was a possibility that he could shop there. Worth a try—what did he have to lose apart from a few minutes?

He swung his backpack on his back and followed the directions the map gave in the direction of the morgue.

The hospital was completely bereft of security. Alex assumed there must be some there somewhere, but there weren't any actively guarding anything. Good. He turned the corridor under the sign for the Mortuary. The happy, cheery signs that had adorned every wall he'd walked passed so far became further between, until they disappeared, and somehow a deep sadness enveloped everything as he walked. *Shit, they should make this place less depressing*. As he reached the double doors to the morgue, the silence was overpowering.

The whole corridor was soul sucking.

Jesus.

He pushed his way through the doors into the corridor beyond. The lights were out in this one. He'd taken one step beyond the public walkway. Alex looked back through the door. There was no one back there. He'd seen barely a soul in the last five minutes. Letting the door go, he flipped the lights on in the corridor. There was an open waiting area to the right and a closed off one to the left. After that there was an office, and beyond that the closed sterile door to the mortuary.

Alex hurried over to it and pushed against it. It was locked, as he expected it would be. He swung his backpack from his shoulder and got his lock pick kit out from inside. He'd picked it up on Amazon, and with the help of a few Youtube tutorials, had become pretty adept at hacking his way through most things. It was amazing the shit you could buy on the Internet to almost exclusively help you be a criminal. He poked around in the lock with the picks. He'd been doing this sort of shit for some time now, and it never really got easy. Just *easier*.

Finally a satisfying click rattled through the darkness and Alex opened the door, sliding into the black beyond. He looked around cautiously before turning the lights on. There were no windows in here—not even in the doors to the corridor.

And it was cold.

He flipped the light switch by the door and the buzz and rattle of shitty fluorescent lighting filled the silence before the room was bathed in a cold blue light. It was all very welcoming.

Alex half expected there to be tables with bodies covered by sheets lining the room, but maybe that was just in the movies? There were tables, but they were disappointingly empty. He went to the far wall. Lots of miniature little doors in rows. That was more like it. Alex opened the first. Pair of feet. Slightly blue. "Voila," he announced in a whisper.

He pulled the drawer out with the body on it. There was a sheet over the corpse, and Alex could tell immediately that it was a man, so no use at all. But his morbid curiosity got the better of him, and he pulled the sheet back. There were few defining features on the corpse except a penis. The

gentleman's head was caved in, as was his chest. He'd been cleaned up well, so there was no blood and bits of inside on him, but Alex assumed that due to the trauma, there could be very little in the way of insides, *inside*, either. He read the tag on the guy's foot. "Well, Carson." *RTA*, it read. He let the tag drop and picked up the sheet to recover him. He glanced at his massive cock. "Lucky boy," he said, re-covering him with the sheet and pushing the drawer back into the freezer. He closed the door. Moved to the next one.

The first four were men. Clearly the town had a vendetta against men. The fifth was a woman.

Alex looked at the tag. This was taking far longer than he'd hoped it would, but if he'd stopped reading all the tags, he'd be moving quicker. This woman had died of … self-inflicted asphyxiation. He looked up her body, and imagined that she was stunning when she wasn't so stiff. He walked up her and let his fingers slide across her cold skin, along the scars left by the autopsy. "Shame," he whispered. "You shouldn't let the bastards win." He covered her back up and moved on to the next one.

Another woman. This time, she was either chubs, or pregnant. He pulled the sheet back. Looking at her, she looked pregnant. She was showing—or possibly bloated from the gasses that turn up after death. Alex had heard that you can shit yourself even hours after. He pushed on her belly and listened. No farting sounds. That was a good sign. She also had no scarring across her stomach, so if there was a little fucker in there, it was still there. He had no idea how old the kid was, though.

Alex looked around the room and quickly found a set of tools. He couldn't tell if they were sterilized or not. He glanced at the woman. But who cared, right? He dragged the tray of tools over, expecting to use nothing but the scalpel. "Okay," he whispered to the woman. "This is gonna hurt you, more than me." He raised his finger without continuing, and then checked the tag. He grinned. "Margaret Philips." He looked her in the face. "Your namesake fucked up my shoulder, you know." He took the scalpel and pushed it with ease into the top of the woman's stomach, drawing it down towards her pubic mound, keeping the blade from slipping into the

flesh too much. He still didn't have much of a grasp on the intricacies of where baby bodies were laying inside the mummy body.

The skin felt different to cut through, compared to the last one. It felt more rubbery. Less tactile. He finished the cut—impressed with the knife—and placed it back on the tray. Pushing the two sides of the woman apart, he saw a child inside. Perfect. He reached in and cupped the kid corpse. It was like rummaging around in the fridge in the supermarket trying to find the best joint of pork. There were no fluids inside her like the last one. Alex guessed that she'd dried out to a husk. He didn't know how long she's been dead for, but maybe it had been a few days.

Maybe she was leaking?

He pulled the dead foetus from the womb and held it up like a prized fish. It looked about the same size as the other one, which was probably a good sign. He placed it carefully on the cut open corpse.

Alex retrieved the lunch box from his back pack. He brought it up and took the lid off, using it as a measure of the size of the kid.

Perfect.

He put the kid in the lunch box and packed it with the towels he'd brought. He'd cook it later. Then he packed everything away into the backpack and slung it over his shoulder. He looked at Margaret. "Sorry about all this," he said, waving over her defiled corpse. "Bills to pay, you understand?" He covered her back up and pushed her back into the cabinet. That was sure going to be a surprise for someone in a couple of days. He turned to leave and then stopped at the tray of tools. He hummed for a couple of seconds and then picked up the leather scalpel storage pouch. He made sure it was full and took it with him.

Looking out the door, Alex made sure the corridor into the Mortuary was still empty, and he left, not bothering to lock the door behind him. He returned to the next doors and flipped the corridor lights off.

He peered through the door into the hospital beyond. There was a woman crying in one of the seats that lined the walls. Damn. Alex watched her. He wasn't really keen on being seen leaving the morgue.

He waited.

And waited.

She was still sitting there weeping. Fucking hell. He looked around the corridor, and went over to the reception desk. Behind it was a pack of disposable masks. *At last, a stroke of luck*. He pulled one over his face and strode with confidence from the morgue.

In the corridor he went to pass the woman—and ignore her—when she looked up and said, "Doctor, do you have a minute?"

Alex wanted to ignore her. He *wanted* to tell her to go fuck herself, and that he had far more pressing matters to deal with. He slid his fingers over the leather scalpel case in his hand. He stopped and politely asked, "What is it?" It was the only way he could think of to not draw attention to himself. He stood over her, intimidation drew powerful emotions. But she patted the seat next to her. Alex sighed, but perched next to her anyway. "What is it?" he asked, again with a little more sympathy.

"I've been diagnosed with cancer," she said. "It's terminal."

That was terrible, yes. But Alex really didn't have time for it. "Have you seen a councillor?"

She nodded, "Of course, yes. But …"

But…? "Go on."

"I've only been given six months, and I just found out I'm four months pregnant. I don't know what to do."

Alex sat back. "Maybe I can help." He rested the leather pouch on his knee.

E p i l o g u e

Alex hurried out of the front door of the hospital with one long dead foetus in a lunch box in his backpack and a fresh one in a steel kidney dish, with another steel kidney dish on top of it like a shit takeaway. Still it was warmer than the last pizza he had delivered. He had fresh blood down his scrubs, but he didn't want to hang around and change. It was going to be light soon, and while he wasn't worried about his work in the morgue earlier in the night, the impromptu too-late abortion he did—with surgical precision—in the makeshift operating room—the ladies toilets—might raise some angst among the other patrons.

Especially finding the corpse of a cancer patient cut up in the stall.

He opened the car boot and slung the backpack, leather pouch full of scalpels—he was keeping them—and kidney dishes in, covered it all with a rug and slammed the boot. He got in, and flipped the lights on, heading out of the car park, and driving hard for the main road back to Ashbury.

—

Alex pulled the tray from the oven, and poked the two foetuses. The one from the dead woman hadn't gotten a good crackling on it like the fresh one. He shrugged. While it didn't matter, it really was a case of live and learn. He rested the tray on the top of his oven, the smell of roasting meat wafting out into the room.

He sat at the table and looked at the third one—the one he'd gotten out of the fridge earlier. Jax had sent him *gold leaf* to coat the little fuckers with. It was a weird fucking thing. Actual gold—cost a goddamn fortune—but wafer thin. It was even edible. Apparently chef's used it. Where? He didn't know. The local kebab shop sure as shit didn't use gold fucking leaf in their dishes. Might have used dead babies by the quality of the food sometimes, though. He shook his head looking at the attempt he'd made in gold leafing the little guy.

It was covered, sure, but it looked shit.

His gaze moved over to the two cooling on the side. They were going to be easier. He'd given up on the gold leaf now and had a new idea.

As they cooled, Alex moved them onto a cake rack. At least this job had managed to up his bakeware collection. Once he'd cleared this stuff out of his kitchen, he really should try his hand at actually making a cake.

Maybe use some fucking gold leaf.

Alex picked up the can of gold car spray paint he'd picked up from the local pound shop and shook it, irritated. Why was this taking so long?

Patience, he thought to himself. He picked up his phone and dialled Chaisai. "Mr Cole," he answered.

"Hi. I've finished with the job. I have the collectibles you asked me to source. I take it that the payment is in place?"

"I have your money, Mr Cole."

"Good. Look. I had a job go hard left on me recently, and I ended up … let's just say that there was some mystic shit going on, possibly interdimensional beings, and, well, the end of the world was mentioned more than once."

"What has this got to do with me, Mr Cole?"

"You don't even sound surprised."

"There are many things in this world that you don't understand. There are many things that most people do not, and will never discover about what is going on in the world. Threats of the end of the world happen daily, I'm sure. They do not surprise me."

"Huh." Alex thought for a second, before continuing. "You said that these collectibles were required for the black arts."

"I did."

"I just want to make sure that they aren't going to be used to, let's say, end the world, or anything."

"They will not. Their usage will have no bearing on you after the delivery."

"Good. I'll get Jax to call you later with the details on the drop."

“As you wish, Mr Cole.” The call dropped. Alex nodded into the phone, giving the kids a quick prod to test their temperature. They were about ready for spraying.

He dialled Jax. “Hey,” she answered.

“I’m about ready for the drop for Chaisai. Secure. Somewhere in Kent. I’m too tired to travel.”

“Cool.”

“Oh, and when you next update whatever advertisements you’re using for me at the moment, can you add something to the end?”

“Of course. What?”

“Paranormal and interdimensional work accepted. Deities slain. Reasonable rates.”

The End

M O T H E R ' S H O M E

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

P R O L O G U E

Warm piss drizzled from Heather. It dribbled down her skin and dripped onto the mattress. The urine slicked across the welts on the insides of her thighs. She had been on this fucking bed, tied naked and spread eagle for God only knew how long. There were no windows, and she could only guess when one day ended and another began. There was someone on the stairs, approaching. They moved quickly.

It couldn't have been Iris.

She tensed, waiting for the door to open because every time it did it got worse. Somehow. The door creaked, the light from beyond invading the cracks and dampening the room with the glow of light. David entered. A lean, sinewy man, his skin hung from his bones giving him the appearance of an age Heather thought he had yet to reach. He was carrying a candle in a holder, his hand cupped around the flame to keep the wind from extinguishing it, even though the light from beyond was electric.

David had arrived at the house the night before they had forced their way into her bedroom. He was a younger man than Iris and he was subservient to her. He slid the candleholder onto the nightstand and looked down Heather's naked body. She pulled on the ties that held her to the bed, she screamed out through the gag they'd forced onto her a few days ago.

After she'd made so much noise. Screaming with pain.

"You're nearly ready," he said quietly, his voice hoarse, dry. David let his eyes linger on her. Her skin covered in burns. Cuts. She could see that her broken body excited him. He reached down, his fingers coming so close to touching her, and then he pulled away, as if he remembered she was the forbidden fruit.

There was someone else.

Outside the room.

Andrew.

He came in with a perch, on which sat a crow, its leg shackled to the wooden stand. He placed it at the end of the bed. The creature was

distressed at being there and it made strangled cawing sounds, pecking at the small metal cuff.

It wanted to be free, just like she did.

Then Iris was at the door. She was wearing the old red dress that she was wearing the day that Heather had started work for her. That was three years ago. She shuffled into the room, the weight of her years making it hard to walk. It was crowded there now, and Iris stood at the end of the bed next to the crow, and opened the book she was carrying. She started to read. It was a foreign tongue that Heather didn't recognise, but it seemed to calm the crow. It just settled on the perch, its gaze dropping down to Heather's body. Heather pulled against the binds on her skin, holding her firm.

David was doing something. He had turned away from her, and she couldn't see what, something on the bedside table. He turned with a syringe and stuck her just off the side of her belly. She squirmed as he pushed the plunger down, whatever it was in the transparent tube cascading into her body. She waited, expecting the drug to take her consciousness. When it did, it would be the end of her … that much she knew. This ceiling would be the last thing she saw.

Heather felt something inside her. A strange warmth released from the point of injection. This was it. It was coming.

A numbness overtook her, all the while the three of them stood and watched.

After a moment, Iris nodded to David who bent down and rested his fingers on Heather's stomach. He watched her face. Something was off … strange. Wrong. She couldn't feel his hand, not properly. Then his other hand came around and in it, a scalpel. He stabbed the tip of the blade into Heather's flesh, in the centre of the numbness.

She tried to pull away, but felt nothing.

He turned back to Iris and returned her nod. He was satisfied.

Heather knew they were preparing her for something.

David took the blade and cut an incision into her belly, long enough for him to part the flesh, for her blood to ooze out onto her skin. Heather

watched. Transfixed in fear. The anaesthetic clawing at her, across and down. It wasn't until she felt the warmth on her arse again, did she realise she had pissed again, uncontrollably without feeling.

Iris never stopped reading the jumble of words.

Heather tried to scream, a dull nothing coming through the gag.

Andrew unshackled the crow, and the bird hopped from the perch to Heather's flesh without hesitation. It landed in the middle of the strip of hair she had between her legs. The things head dropped to the side as it watched her, breathing, her breasts rising and falling, as the blood from inside her drooled out onto her skin. It hopped forward to the wound and looked in. The bird shrieked and then plunged it's beak into the wound, pulling its head back out, a beak full of strings of red flesh. Heather closed her eyes. She could feel the thing there—she could feel the movement and the pressure, but not the pain. It dipped into her again and pulled more flesh from her body and she knew that she was already dead now. There was no stopping this.

Andrew came around to the side of her and stuck a needle into her thigh.

She didn't flinch.

"She is ready," he said. He was unbuckling his trousers.

Heather yanked her arms, tears flooding from her, as she watched the crow eating her, and Andrew disrobing. He was already hard, as he stood, as naked as she was, untying her feet. She tried, but she couldn't move them. She was dead from the waist down.

Andrew got between her legs.

The crow pulled strips of flesh from inside her.

Iris read the words from the book.

She felt Andrew enter her. He was holding her weight, his knees under her arse, and was fucking her. The crow never stopped, even with his sweating, sticky frame writhing over her, over it.

David was smiling. Heather could see him hard in his trousers too. He was probably going to be next. But she was getting tired now. She looked

down at the crow. For each yank of flesh that came out, it raised its head and bunted its head back, allowing the meat to slip into its gullet. It ate voraciously and without control, getting fatter without care.

And Andrew fucked her. His face contorted as he came.

Heather closed her eyes, and let the sleep take her, feeling the crow move, feeling the flesh be freed.

C H A P T E R 1

"The Burns Mansion." Matty pointed across the dash of the beaten up red Mondeo, across the fields of Chainhurst to what could—at a glance—be construed as something akin to Wayne Manor. It wasn't, of course. It was just a nice, old, house that had been in the family for some generations. How many, even Matty wasn't sure. *Some*.

Brooke followed his finger out to the lush green of the Kent countryside, beautiful even with the early morning dew clinging to the top of the grasses. She looked at the house. "Nice," she said.

Matty smiled. He liked her understated way. They lived at the seaside, some hour or so drive away. Spending some of his formative youth here, Matty got away from the countryside when he was very young. He was moved to Birchingate on the south-eastern coast. He couldn't remember why, though. But that was where he'd met Brooke, many years later.

They'd been on country lanes for about twenty minutes since leaving the motorway, and were now following it around to the turn off to the front of the property. *Turn left in one hundred yards*. It was the first time the GPS on his phone had spoken in fifteen minutes and it made him jump. He indicated left and took the turn into a cheap tarmac track between two fields.

"I was expecting gates." Brooke let out a little laugh and put her hand on his knee.

"I'm glad you find disappointment funny," he said, and then a little quieter, "Wait until you see the house up close."

The track to the house was overgrown. It should have been immaculately sculpted, but it looked like it hadn't been touched by a landscaper, or even a gardener in at least two years. Matty ploughed through the brambles that jutted out into the track without care for the paintwork on the car. The vehicle dipped and dropped as they slid in and out of potholes in the tarmac. Matty thought the track should have been gravelled. You know, classy like. But tarmac was cheaper, and judging by

the state of it, put down poorly—cheaply—too. As the car came around the bend towards the house, Matty could see another car parked there.

He pulled up to a stop next to it.

Looking across Brooke and out the passenger side window, he could see that the car was still occupied. A man in a suit. He was older than Matty expected. Fifties, maybe? Matty pulled his seatbelt off and glanced at Brooke. She was looking out the window to the front of the house. "Dilapidated, right?" he asked. She shook her head, but didn't speak. He opened the door, and the cold air rushed in. "Wait here," he said. "Just until we can get in." In the back of his mind, he knew that it wasn't going to be any warmer in the house, than out in the drive, but there would be no use to them both standing in the cold for no reason.

The man in the other car had started to fuss around with something as soon as they were in the driveway. Now he got out.

Matty wasn't one for fashion, or indeed the finer things in life, but he could tell the man's suit was expensive, as was his car. It had a bonnet ornament. The man got out and shrugged his jacket closer around him. He gently closed the car door and brushed his hand down the paintwork. Matty walked over, his hand out in greeting. "Matthew Burns," he said. "You must be from Joshua Howard?"

The man took Matty's hand and shook it. He nodded. "Indeed. James Dowdry. I see you brought the weather," he said, smiling.

Matty looked up. "It should break soon. Supposed to be sunny later."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

Matty must have looked expectant, because Dowdry handed the envelope in his hand to him. A4. Thick. "This is everything that you need."

Matty took it, he gave it a glance, but nothing more. "You'll have to forgive me Mr Dowdry, but I've never done this before." He shuffled uncomfortably. "What happens now?"

Dowdry shook his head, raising his shoulders slightly. "There's nothing for you to worry about. Nothing to do. As your solicitors should have conveyed to you, the entirety of the estate has passed into your name now."

He looked around, as if he was trying to find words to fill the empty space. "Any fees from your legal teams should have been taken care of, and a full itinerary passed to you. If you have any questions along that line, perhaps you should consult your own solicitor. I don't want to give you any misleading information." He took a step back, signalling not only had he finished answering Matty—without actually saying anything—but that he also desired to leave.

Matty raised the envelope. "So, what's this?"

"The keys," Dowdry said. "Paperwork regarding the things that we have been taking care of in the interim. You'll find it all in order, I assure you."

Matty nodded. No doubt. However, he still had no real idea what was going on. His head hadn't been in the right place for all this when it started, and once it had, it was no better, obviously. "Okay, thank you. Can I get hold of you should I have any questions?"

"Of course," Dowdry pointed to the envelope. "Our contact details and everything else you might need are in there."

Matty looked once again at the envelope, nodding his head. "Thank you, Mr Dowdry."

"You're welcome." Dowdry stepped forward and thrust his hand at Matty's free hand. The two shook. "Well." Dowdry opened his car door, and stepped one foot in. "I'll be on my way. Good luck with everything, and I hope that you find the house …" His words drifted off. "Anyway, please give us a call if you need anything." He dropped into the car and slammed the door, starting the engine all in a single motion, and reversed quite haphazardly around in the driveway, and then out, at speed to the tarmac, and out of sight.

Matty stood in the cold and watched him go. He shook his head. "What a strange little man," he muttered. He opened the envelope and looked in. There was a large wodge of paperwork and dropped down the side a set of keys. Only two. Matty looked back to the driveway. Perhaps he should have tried these before Dowdry had left?

Too late now.

He pulled the keys out and walked across the front of the car towards the house, waving them at Brooke as he did. She slipped out of the car and hurried over to him, wrapping her fingers around her bare arms. She made this *brrr* noise that Matty felt adorable. “Come on,” he said, hurrying to the door. *Please work*, he thought. The last thing he needed was to have to call the agents and then wait in the car of a couple of hours. But the first key slipped into the lock and door opened. It was an old door, older at least than he was, but the lock on it was a Yale type. It looked new. Probably replaced by the agents after his mother had died.

He pushed the door open and while Brooke slid past him into the hallway, he stood and looked. He hadn’t been here in so long. The hallway hadn’t changed. Not since he was a child. That dark hard wood circular table still stood there. Where the post would sit until his father came home and picked it up. A vase in the middle of it. Roses, he suddenly remembered. Mother always had roses in it. There was a vase in the centre of the empty table now, but it wasn’t one that Mother would have used. It was glass. She would have used a white porcelain one. There were no flowers in it.

“Come on,” Brooke said. “Shut the door, it’s freezing.”

Matty shook away the memories. He stepped over the threshold of the house and closed the door behind him with a clunk. He looked around the hall. The wide stairs in the centre of the hall leading up to a landing and the bedrooms, and his father’s study behind the closed door to the right of them. His father had died years ago, and he had no idea what was behind the door now. But to him it would always be his father’s study. To the left of the stairs, the living room. Beyond that the dining room, the kitchen. He could remember it all so clearly now that he was here, and yet yesterday, on the drive down even, his memories were no more than shadows.

“Still cold,” Brooke interrupted.

C H A P T E R 2

Matty was leaning on the table in the hallway with the paperwork from the envelope strewn over it. According to the letter that was on top of the pile—from the agents, Joshua Howard—the second key was for the basement. They recommended that the lock to the front door be changed at his earliest convenience, and that all other keys to the property could be found in the kitchen. Then there was an inventory of them. Back door. Wood shed. That sort of thing.

Brooke came down the stairs. "Sorry," she said. "It must have been the cold."

Matty glanced up. "You find paper?"

"Yes. There was one. A new one. They must have left it." She waved her hand at the paperwork and then joined Matty at the table, opposite him. "So?"

Matty shrugged. "It's all here. Utilities, council." He tapped one of the documents. "Even tells me what day the bin men come."

"You get bin men down here?"

"Private collection. Costs." He brushed some of the papers together. "It's all ours," he said.

"So what do you want to do first?"

"We should go shopping, but I suppose I should look around and check the place." He picked up the two keys and thrust them into his pocket. Looking around the hallway, he pointed to the door under the stairs. "That way," he said. "I think."

The door opened out into the classic country mansion kitchen. There was hardwood worktops across the room and a farm sink. A real deep one. A solid oak table used for the preparation of food—and for the staff to eat at. Back when the property had staff, of course. There was an old fridge freezer in the corner, old, but not unusable. Matty walked over and opened the door. It was clean and empty. Off. He looked around the back of it and

found the plug. He pushed it into the socket and flipped it on. The fridge made a low hum. “That’s something,” he said. Brooke was at the door, watching him, but he wasn’t speaking to her. Not really. He stood by the AGA and tapped the cast iron top. “This is going to take some getting used to.” It was older than he was. He glanced over to Brooke. “We might need to pick up a microwave.” She laughed. He tried the back door, out onto the land. Locked. Good. He looked around the kitchen. “Do you see the keys?”

Brooke came into the room and looked around the surfaces. They were nowhere obvious. “What about the drawers?”

The two of them systematically went from drawer to drawer, to cupboard. Nothing.

“Great,” said Matty, crouching by the last cupboard. “Still. I can give them a call later. I’m sure there will be other things that I’ll need to ask them about.”

“It’s pretty well fitted out in here.”

Matty nodded. Pots and pans. Fridge. Cooker—he glanced at the AGA—if he could work out how to turn it on. Plates. Knives. “Did you stick your head in the bedrooms when you were up there?”

Brooke nodded. “You know me.”

“Beds?”

“I only looked through a couple of the doors, but there are beds, all made.”

“Maybe the agents did a good job?” He got back to his feet.

—

The old staircase creaked as they climbed up. The hallway was just as Matty remembered. There was still that line of carpet that trailed down the centre of the hall, but didn’t reach the skirting board. The one that he had picked at when he was a kid, to find out if it was glued down or not. The walls held paintings that had hung there for years, paintings of people from the family, he guessed. He couldn’t remember anyone talking about them when he was younger. He left Brooke wandering away in front of him, and

he approached the first painting in the hallway. It was an oil painting, just as you would expect to find in a castle. Except the picture was nothing like one of those. It was of a man, austere, proper looking. Regal, even. He was standing with a red curtain behind him. One hand behind his back, the other in front of him clutching what looked like a parchment. Matty ran his finger across the name plate on the base of the frame. *Alfred Damelaer Burns*, it read. He looked into the fellows eyes and nodded a greeting as if the man could see him. Then he moved to the next, walking around the small table that held a lamp. The painting was similar. Another old man, the same background. He looked in the man's hand. The same parchment. Perhaps it was supposed to be the deeds to the house? A signifier of power? He looked down the hall to Brooke. She had pushed open the last door in the hall and was looking in. She looked pensive. He followed her down and stood off her shoulder. "My old room," he said. He looked by her, in. Not much had changed, except the *him* from the room was gone. It was nothing more now than a spare bedroom. A single bed. Wardrobe big enough to have fucking Narnia on the inside of it. Bedside table. Lamp. Rug on the hard floor.

Brooke looked up at him. "So what happened? You said you spent most of your childhood living with your Uncle. Why? This place looks like a mansion. You'd be mad to leave."

Matty shrugged. He had been asked this question in a variety of ways so many times, before. Even by her. "I got sent away. No idea why. I never really had anything to do with my mum and dad after that. Then dad died and mum sort of became a recluse." He stepped by her into the room. "But I see they got rid of me pretty effectively." He turned sadly back out of the room and went across the hall to the opposing room. "Come on," he said to Brooke. "Plenty to explore. You're going out with a Lord of the fucking Manor now, don'tcha know?"

She laughed, and grabbed on to his arm, sensing his sadness. "Yes, m'lordy."

The two of them stood in the doorway of the next bedroom. "Mother's room," he said, making no motion to enter.

Brooke could feel his apprehension, and she pulled him away from the door down the hall to the next.

Matty pushed it open. It was similar to his old room. There was a double bed this time and another, large, wardrobe. “Father’s room,” he said quietly. “I see she emptied this out as well.”

“Come on.” Brooke pulled him away from the door to the next, opposite. She pushed the door open and pulled him in. “This was for?”

“Visitors.”

The room was painted with a pale blue hue. There was a double bed, fresh linen. A new looking lamp, a radio alarm clock. There was a TV on the wall. “Mods,” Brooke said.

Matty went over to the wardrobe, white, and opened it. It was made of chipboard. “It didn’t used to look like this.” The wardrobe was empty. He opened the drawers on the bedside table and pulled out a notice. It was a set of emergency phone numbers. “Maybe mum’s help used this room. Nurses, maybe?”

“Well,” Brooke said, going over to the bed and perching on the edge. “Then this should be our room, for now, at least.”

Matty nodded. “Cool.”

—

The two of them explored the rest of the first floor. Another couple of rooms —probably bedrooms at one time—and a set of stairs going to the attic. The door at the top was locked, and the key with the rest of the house keys—wherever they were. And finally a bathroom. *Only one?* Brooke had asked. Matty had responded by simply stating it was an old house. He remembered that there was another one in what was the servant’s quarters, *wherever they were*. He was sure they’d come across them at some point. They were here somewhere. They returned to the ground floor and continued around. The living room had a fairly modern TV but the dining room was the same as he remembered. Untouched since he was a child. A long table, dark wood, sat twelve.

They went to his father's study. The door wasn't locked, and for some reason that had surprised Matty. There was a desk in the centre of the far wall facing into the room. A typewriter on one side. The desk was leather topped. The walls to the room were lined with books. His father had been using it as a library as well as an office, it seemed. Brooke dived straight into the books as soon as the door was open, but Matty walked the edge of the room to the desk. He stood behind it and ran his fingers over the back of his father's chair for the first time. Ever. It was like he was discovering a past that he had never known. A connection to a man he could barely remember.

Brooke pulled a book from the shelf and let it drop open in her hands. She gave him a glance. "I call dibs," she said. Her glance turned into a stare. "When was the last time you saw him?"

Matty shook his head. "I don't know. When I was young. Six?" It was only a guess. "I can't remember that much about him." He pulled on the drawers to the desk. They were all locked. He returned to Brooke's side. "Whatcha found?"

"I wasn't expecting books on folklore," she said, running her eyes down the words on the page.

"Huh. No." Matty looked over the books. There was a wild selection. They ranged from local history and the surrounding area, to books on the strange and supernatural. He let his fingers walk across the titles. "The fuck?" he whispered.

"Quite," Brooke said, sliding the book back on the shelf. "I shall explore in here later. But we need supplies. Local town?"

Matty nodded. "Yeah. And I need to get the heating on."

"True. I'll take the car and GPS my way to the store if you can tell me the name. You get the heating on."

Matty agreed. He pulled two sets of keys from his pocket, the car keys and the house keys. "Head to Chainhurst village." He took his phone from his pocket. "It's gone nine now, should be open." He passed her the car keys and kept the house keys. "I'm on heat."

"Yes you are." She grinned at him.

C H A P T E R 3

After Matty had waved her down the driveway, he went back into the house. They hadn't finished looking around by a long stretch, but he could see his own breath. It felt colder in here now than outside, what with the sun coming out. He supposed older places like this held onto the cold.

He unlocked the door to the basement and pocketed the keys. He had no intention of keeping the internal doors of the house locked. Didn't see the point. He flipped the light switch inside the door on, and it lit the way down the stairs. He checked around for spiders. He hated spiders.

The stairs creaked as he descended and there was a must in the air, a stale dampness. He didn't know how long it had been since the heating had been fired in the house, only that the controls were down here, somewhere. Half expecting a furnace, he flipped the light on at the bottom of the stairs and looked around. The room was sparse, a table, some furniture, boxes, old kitchenware, books, the usual sort of things people dumped in the basement to forget about. "Jesus. Fucking. Christ." He'd wished it had been a furnace. Matty walked over to the central heating boiler. "Where the fuck did this come from, the seventies?"

He wiped the dust from the controls and wished he knew more about boilers from the dark ages. He switched the power to *on*, and a deep rumble emitted from the base of the unit, suspended on the wall. He flinched back at the sound, half-expecting to be eviscerated in a fiery gas explosion. *Tick, tick, tick*. He felt the pipes. Cold. Matty pressed a couple of the buttons on the front. It was too old to have a digital display on it and there was only one predominant knob, with all the controller's indicators worn off. He twisted it around and waited a few minutes. Felt the pipe again. Still cold. Twist again. Hot water seemed to be moving along the pipe. That was good. Wasn't it? He hoped he hadn't started some catastrophic chain reaction, and made a mental note to call a plumber in the next couple of days to get it checked. Maybe get a quote for a new one.

After all, this *was* all his now.

He spun around and looked at the rest of the basement. It was going to take weeks—months even—for him to sort through all this. He had to decide what he wanted to do, whether he should leave work and move in here at the house. It was clearly what Brooke wanted. Maybe she was happy to leave work? But they still needed to work at something. This place didn't make money. That said, he had no idea how much actual cash was in the estate. He needed to get himself straight and get all this worked out.

He walked over to the table. There were papers on it. A few books. Matty looked at the titles. They looked like they might have come from the weird and strange section in his dad's library.

A door slammed upstairs.

Matty turned to the stairs. "That was quick," he shouted up at the ceiling. "What did you forget?" Walking over to the stairs and looking up he saw that the door at the top was closed. "Brooke?" he called. "Heeeeeyyy." He went up to the door and tried it. It didn't open. "Damn it. Brooke?" he shouted. "You out there?" Nothing. Maybe the wind had taken it.

Matty rattled the knob and gently shouldered the door. It didn't budge.

Maybe it had locked itself? *That's a stretch*, he thought to himself, digging in his pocket for the key. It wasn't there. Just his phone. "What the fuck?" He must have dropped it. He went back down the stairs looking at the floor in front of his feet the whole time. Across the floor to the boiler. Back to the table. Nothing. "Shit." He pulled his arse up on it and sat. He unlocked his phone and dialled Brooke.

It made a broken ringing sound. He was below the earth's surface, after all, and it didn't surprise him that the reception was a bit shot. It went to answer phone. "Hey," he said. "You're probably driving, but when you get the shopping can you come straight back? I've gone and locked myself in the basement somehow. But I got the heat on." He paused for a second. "Love you." He ended the call and looked around the room. The light lit enough for the room to function as storage, but little else. It was a good size room though. It would make a decent living space with the right lighting. But it was freezing down here. Colder than upstairs even. He didn't think

that made a whole heap of sense, but it didn't matter. With the boiler down here, getting some new radiators fitted should be a piece of piss.

Matty could feel a burning sensation in the base of his feet. Very odd. He slid back off the table and dropped his phone back into his pocket. He picked up the papers from the table. They were covered in a writing that he didn't recognise. I wasn't like anything he'd seen before. The characters weren't like normal letters. He dropped them back to the table and picked up one of the books opening it. He scanned down the pages. It was old, but at least it was in English. It read like Japanese Hi Fi instructions. Broken English, talking about the dead and the afterlife. It didn't make any sense whatsoever, to be honest. He left it on the table and started around the room looking for something to pass the time with.

He opened the door of a wardrobe. It was old, but only by his standards. Looked like it was an MDF thing from MFI, back in the day. The door dropped from the wardrobe, no hinges attached. He let out a little squeal, and backed away, and then gave out a short laugh.

Matty didn't think it was getting warmer down here. He went over to the boiler and pushed his hand against the pipe, withdrawing it quickly as the heat stung him. The pipework should have given off a little heat, but he was sure it was getting colder by the minute. He rubbed his hands over his arms wishing he'd left his coat on. "Damn it," he muttered to himself.

The burning in his feet became more apparent. He paced, trying to get his blood circulating. It was obviously that. He was just cold and needed to move. The pain grew. It started as pins and needles, crackling on the soles of his feet. Then it was an aching in his ankles. It felt like he'd run a marathon yesterday. He returned to the table, the pain almost hobbling him as he moved. He sat back down, he pulled the laces undone on his trainer, and dragged it from his foot. He let the shoe drop to the floor, and pulled his sock off. The veins on his foot were more pronounced. Sticking out of his skin like they were trying to push more blood than usual around him. "Fuck," he said quietly, poking his finger down on the large vein on the top of his foot. It burned, sending a sharp, hot sting needling up his foot into his leg. "Ow," he exclaimed. "Lesson learned," he mutter. "If it hurts, don't poke it."

He followed the veins up to his trousers and pulled the leg up. They protruded in his legs as well. The pain was rising from his feet, up his shins, towards his knees now. "I'm having a stroke, aren't I?" He let his trouser leg go and wiggled his toes. They moved, but he could feel each joint with the pain of an arthritic ninety year old. The pain spiked into his knee, like someone had just Buffy'ed a stake into it. He fumbled in his pocket for his phone. He swiped his thumb across the screen to unlock it, and glanced at his foot. The veins were now darker. Almost black and pronounced. "Okay, that's bad." He pressed the call button and started to dial Brooke. He stopped himself and deleted the number, thumbing nine, nine—his leg spasmed hard—far worse than a cramp and he rolled onto the table, his leg cocked at an angle he didn't know he could move it to. "Ah," he spluttered, through gritted teeth. Lifting the phone back up in front of his face, he went to press the last nine, the veins on his arm sticking out like they were on fire, and his hand cramped, the phone falling from his grip to the table and clattering off to the floor.

He struggled to breathe.

His back curled, pushing his shoulders out and he writhed on the table, his feet kicking out, sending the papers and the books sprawling to the floor. Matty's breathing laboured. It hurt to draw the air in, his ribs stung as they moved, it was as if he could feel the blood pumping too hard and too fast through his heart. His heart felt too large, bloated in his chest. He stared at the ceiling. Tears in his eyes. He didn't want to die. Not here. Not like this.

Then it start to subside. A little. Not enough for him to move, but enough for him to breathe a shallow breath. He lay still on the table, aware of the coldness that surrounded him now. It was like he was laying in snow.

Then came a warmth.

It was subtle. A stirring inside him. It was … he focussed on it … the only part of him that wasn't in pain. It was below his stomach. He had just enough wit about him to know … it was his loins. He was feeling some sort of emotional movement. *Now's not the time*, he thought to himself. It moved. He felt it pass his groin, tenderly, like a lover, then it moved out of him, away, leaving only the cold behind once again.

A stabbing, deep and hard in his chest.

"No," he muttered. He knew he had to move, or Brooke was going to find him here, like this, dead on a table.

The pain in his chest stopped, as did the rest of it. Instantly. Like a grip on him had been released. Matty drew air back into his lungs. He was still cold. He had to move, but he couldn't, not right away. The will was there, but the strength gone. He raised his head, looked at his hand. The veins were still firm and hard, but the darkness within them gone. He pulled himself onto his side, and prepared to roll himself off the table. He had to get moving. Circulate. Something. Anything.

Then the warmth came to the room.

Suddenly. Quickly. He dropped from the table, his legs unable to take the weight of his body, and he fell to the floor with a grunt. Like he'd been trapped in the snow outside a cabin and the door had just opened, allowing him to flop to the floor in front of a roaring fire. It gave him strength to move. He pulled himself up onto his elbows and looked at his hands. They were normal. He drew air into his lungs, his ribs ached, but there was no pain. He sucked it in, enjoyed the sensation.

Getting to his feet, he examined his foot. It was normal, too.

Matty rested his hand on his chest. "Okay," he said, quietly, backing up and pushing his butt down on the table. He walked gently across to the stairs and up. At the top he tried the handle and the door opened.

He stood there for a second waiting, unsure, confused.

The keys were in the lock on the outside of the door. He took them and looked at them. "Right." He pocketed the keys and left the stairs, closing the door behind him, and went to the kitchen.

He wanted some water.

C H A P T E R 4

Brooke pulled up at the house a couple of hours after she'd left. She got out of the car and went over to the front door of the house. It was open. She stuck her head in and called out, "Hey. Give me a hand." Then she returned to the car and opened the boot.

Matty came to the door and out. He crossed over the driveway. "Didn't you get my message?" he called.

Brooke frowned and pulled her phone from her pocket. She scrunched her face up and shook her head. "Nothing. Damn it. Did you want me to pick anything else up?"

Matty shook his head and joined her at the boot. He ran his hand through the handles of a couple of the bags and picked them up.

Brooke studied him. "You okay?" she asked. "You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine," he said. "I got the heating on. I had a problem with the basement door is all but I've fixed it now."

"What's wrong?"

Matty shook his head and headed for the front door. He wasn't going to tell her. She'd only worry. Next time he was back in town he'd make an appointment with the doc. It was probably stress or something. Matty knew he was kidding himself, but he was a man. What was the point in having sand if not to bury your head in it? "Just a bit under the weather, I think." That would do.

He carried the bags straight through to the kitchen and put them on the table, while Brooke brought what was left and shut up the front door. "Warmer," she said. "Any problems in the basement?"

Matty glanced at her. "Like?"

"With the heating?"

"Oh. No."

She started to unpack the bags. "I've got enough food for the weekend." She smiled broadly at him. "So we don't need to do anything

apart from sort out here." She pulled a bottle of wine, white, and a bottle of whiskey, cheap, from one of the bags. "But I reckon we get our room sorted out first, and then relax. We can start tomorrow."

—

The two of them cleared the lunch dishes away together, and washed up, before going upstairs to the spare room. *Their room*. Brooke pulled the sheets off the bed. They were clearly clean, Matty had insisted, but she said she wanted to be sure, and for it to be *theirs*. Matty spent the same time dicking with the TV trying to get a channel. Eventually, he managed it, and he slumped back onto the bed. His ribs still ached and his ankles felt like they had weights attached to them, but he was feeling far better.

"Whatcha found?" Brooke sat down on the foot of the bed next to him.

"Freeview. Got about fifteen channels."

"That all?"

He snorted. "I think that's effing marvellous considering where we are."

"So what we watching?"

"Eastenders."

"Fuck that shit." She took the remote from his hands and tossed it onto the rug on the floor at the bottom of the bed, before pushing him back onto the mattress. Brooke straddled his hips and leaned forward, kissing him, hard. "Well, lord-of-all-you-survey, what is it you desire?"

"I love you," he whispered back.

Brooke slipped her hands between her legs and undid his belt. She popped the button on the front of his jeans, and pulled them apart, drawing the zipper down at the same time. Matty reached forward and cupped her breasts through her shirt, feeling the hardness of her bra underneath. She pushed his hands back to his side. "Lordship looks tired. Let me," she said. She slid back off the end of the bed and pulled his trainers off. Matty gave out a little groan of pain, but Brooke took it as pleasure. Then she took his jeans by the legs and roughly dragged them off his body. "Master's getting hard," she said.

He was.

She pulled her shirt over her head, and then dropped down onto him, kissing his chest, working her way down his torso, to his shorts. She pulled them down off his hard cock and teased it with her tongue. Matty groaned again, this time in pleasure. “Oh God,” he moaned. She knelt back up and pulled his shorts from his legs, before standing up and reaching round behind herself and undoing her bra, letting drop from her body to the rug.

She absently kicked the remote out of the way, under the bed.

“Lord of all you survey,” she said, quietly, almost a growl. She slid her hand into her skirt and undid the button, loosening it and letting it drop from around her waist to the floor. She wasn’t wearing anything under it. Just a pair of stockings.

Matty got up on his elbows. He grinned. Then frowned. “Did you go out like that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Tee,” she demanded, making an upward gesture with her finger.

Matty sat and pulled his t-shirt off over his head. Then she gestured him away, and he slid up the bed to lean against the headboard.

She climbed on the bed and stood at the foot of it, naked apart from her stockings.

Matty could see Dot Cotton in Albert Square between her legs, but tried not to focus on her.

Brooke put her fingers on her breasts, cupping them and squeezing. She gyrated slightly, like she was dancing to some unheard pop song. All Matty could think of was the *dun, dun, dun, dun-dundundundun*, of the Eastenders theme tune. He shook his head, and tried to blink it away. She slid her hands down to the trimmed hair between her legs and down, in, touching herself.

Brooke. Not Dot Cotton.

Matty started to giggle. He couldn’t help it.

“Hey,” she snapped, dropping her hands away and falling to her knees, over his legs. She slapped him on the chest and laughed with him.

"I'm sorry," he said, pulling her close. He kissed her, hard on the lips, as she rubbed herself against his straining cock. "I want you."

"You'll have to wait, giggly." She rolled off him, leaving him to groan in anticipation. Brooke strode over to the wardrobe where one of their bags lay unopened at the base of it. She spread her legs a little and bent forward, allowing Matty to see her. She yanked the zipper on the bag open and rummaged for a moment, before pulling something out and holding it behind her back. Matty watched her, doing as he was told, waiting. She returned to the base of the bed and stepped up on it again. She had her Rabbit in her hand. She switched it on, the low buzzing started.

"Kinky," he muttered, smiling. Dot Cotton was staring at him, smoking a cigarette. *Oh, Ethel,* she said. It must be a repeat. Classic 'Enders. "Can you turn that off?" he asked.

Brooke looked around the floor and didn't see the remote. "No," she said. "You'd better watch me."

Matty's hard-on strained, the pre-cum slipping from the end as he flexed involuntarily.

Brooke rolled the Rabbit across her clit, holding it there, her eyes closed, her mouth open. "Oh," she said, quietly.

"Fuck me," he pleaded.

Brooke smiled. "You wait your turn." She slipped the vibe inside her gently as she made a small squeaking noise. She pulled it out, and ran it across her clit again. She dropped down to her knees and crawled up him, without removing the vibe from herself.

As she slid over his cock, Matty felt the vibrations against his own skin. Then she pushed her heat down on his cock, the vibe still touching herself.

Matty nearly exploded as her hot, wetness slid over him but he bit it back. Kept it in. She rocked against him and it took all he had not to cum right then. "Fuck," he muttered.

"You like that," she whispered. She sounded like she was close herself.

"Yes," said Dot. "You like that?"

Matty snapped back to the there and then. He strained to look passed Brooke to the TV. Dot was talking to someone off screen.

"Hey," Brooke snapped. She got off him. "You arsehole." She let her Rabbit drop to her side. "Fucking Eastenders?"

"No," Matty said. "No, I thought …" He stopped himself from saying anything else. It was going to sound stupid. "No, Brooke, Honey."

Brooke looked from the screen to Matty, lying on the bed, hard as stone. "Fuck," she said, again, quietly. She sat down next to him and took his erection in her hand, stroking him with one hand and turning the vibrator off with the other.

He made sure to look at her and ignore the TV. Maybe he was having a breakdown of some sort. Still, there was no time for that. The desire was building in him fast. He was going to cum. The semen jacked out of him hard, across his stomach and up his chest. He made a weird primal grunt.

Brooke got up. "I'm going for a shower." She left the room.

Matty would have stopped her, but he hadn't gotten his head straight yet. She was gone before he realised it. "Fuck," he said to himself.

C H A P T E R 5

Brooke left the shower running and went straight downstairs, leaving Matty to his thoughts. He stood under the running water, washing the spunk from himself. He just felt dirty now. It wasn't supposed to happen like that. And what the hell was happening to him, anyway? The aches in his bones seemed to have left him, but he was sure that the TV had actually spoken to him, which was, of course, utter horseshit. He could have had a mild stroke? Maybe he should tell Brooke what happened in the basement? Maybe she wouldn't believe him now. She might think he was making it up to try and fix what had just happened.

Goddamn.

They're in the middle of nowhere, where the hell do you get flowers from?

He paused. *Hold on*. He *was* lord of *a* manor, right? He finished washing and flipped the shower off. He could still hear the TV running in the bedroom down the hall. Matty pulled his shirt and jeans on and then returned to the bedroom. He pulled on his trainers and hurried down the stairs. He could hear Brooke in the kitchen, so he slipped out of the front of the house silently, pulling the door to. He circled around the house to the left, the opposite side from the kitchen window where he could have been seen, and went to the gardens.

It was colder outside now. The sun was going down on the other side of the house and the temperature was lower than it had been even that morning. The gardens on this side of the house were plentiful with wild flowers. The other side of the house had a similar garden that was overlooked by the kitchen, in which the vegetables grew. He crossed to the potting shed and rummaged around until he found a blade. It wasn't sharp, a little rusty even, but it would do. He went to the wild flowers patch and started to cut off the stems of what he hoped were pretty flowers, and not weeds. Weed. He could use some of that now. *No,* he thought. *Focus*. He didn't really know one flower from another and while Brooke possibly

didn't either, the way today was going she might just turn out to be a secret botanist.

Once he had a reasonable sized bouquet he slipped the blade into his back pocket and headed around to the front of the house.

Brooke was still in the kitchen.

Matty placed the flowers in the vase that sat on the table in the hallway and took the whole thing through to the kitchen, where he presented it to her. "I'm sorry," he said. "You know I love you and I appreciate you. I just thought Dot Cotton was trying to get in on the action and I was surprised." She giggled, lightly. *A good start*. "I'm sure it's just the pressure of the house and the arrangements and everything. I'm not myself."

She took the vase and sniffed at the flowers, then placed them on the table. "I love you too." She embraced him. "But look what I found." She led him across the kitchen to a narrow door at the rear of the room. Behind it was an even narrower stairwell. "Where does it go?" she asked.

Matty shook his head. "Must be the old servant's quarters. I don't remember."

"Servants quarters," she mocked. "Your highnessness."

Matty smiled at her. "Shall we?" He gestured up, and Brooke nodded.

—

The stairs were bare, uncarpeted, but they didn't creak. Matty tried to picture where they led in the house. They circled up, around, and over the study. Kept in good condition so as not to bother the lord of the house when he was working, he assumed. At the top was a small hallway with four doors off it, again bare wood floorboards. There was a smell up here. Something off, maybe a little rotten. Matty pushed the first door open. A bathroom. There was a small spark of recognition. "I've been in there," he said quietly.

"Number one or number two?" Brooke giggled behind him.

Matty dismissed her, and continued to the next door. It was a small bedroom, the ceiling sloping with the roof, and with the eves of the house.

It contained a single bed that was unmade. The mattress was stained. Not badly, but not made up like the other rooms by the agents.

"Do you think they even came up here?" she asked.

Matty shrugged. "No idea." He moved along to the next room. It was similar. In the eves. No windows. Just a bed. Side table.

"There's no electrics in the rooms," Brooke said.

Matty shook his head. "I wouldn't expect these rooms to have been used in years."

"Then why are the beds still here? Why isn't this storage?"

She had a good point. Matty opened up the last door. It was a larger room. A single bed still, but this room had a wardrobe, and a window. This room was where the smell was coming from.

"Christ on a cracker," Brooke exclaimed when the stench hit her. She pinched her nose and backed out of the room.

Matty held his breath and crossed to the window pushing it open. He looked out. The room was in the eves of the house but extended to accommodate some head room and a window. "Must be for the head of the staff. Butler of something," he said absently.

"What's that fucking smell?" she asked.

Matty looked around the floor. He got down onto his knees and looked under the bed. "I can't see anything, but it's stronger down here. Maybe a rat died under the floorboards or something?" He stood. "We'll leave the window open for now and I'll come back up with some tools tomorrow.

Brooke turned and went down the hall. "We should have a painting party or something."

It would help.

C H A P T E R 6

Matty awoke. It was still dark. He raised his head and looked over to Brooke. He could just about make out her silhouette in the dark. He swung his feet from the bed and sat. It was hot in the room. The window was closed and he decided against opening it. He didn't want to wake her. *Thermostat*. It hadn't occurred to him earlier that there had to be one somewhere if there was a radiator. He got up and crept from the room, closing the door behind him.

He turned the light on in the hallway. Most of the memories of the house were still a blur, and he wasn't about to fall down the stairs because he was saving electricity.

He went downstairs without finding his robe. It was too hot in the house to worry about that. Crossing over to the basement door, he opened it and looked in. There was a moment of trepidation—hesitation—as he stood at the top of the stairs. The tingle in the base of his feet returned, just for a second. He shook his head and flipped the light on the stairs on before going down. He knew the thermostat wouldn't be down there, but he had no idea where it would be—another question for the agents, he guessed—so he could just turn the thing off for now. The house should stay plenty warm until morning.

At the bottom of the stairs, he turned the light on down there too.

It was cooler in the basement and it gave him some respite from the suffocating heat upstairs. How Brooke could sleep through it, he didn't know. He went over to the boiler and turned the big knob in the centre. The boiler clicked and the fire inside sounded like it was dropping. Hopefully that was enough.

Rather than go back upstairs, Matty went over to the table and bent down, picking up the papers and books that he had managed to scatter across the floor earlier. Whatever had happened to him that morning, it felt like an eternity ago. He didn't even ache now. He was fine, sure of it. Justification done, he placed the books and papers back on the table. He

padded barefoot over to the furniture piled up on the side of the room, and crouched next to it. He lifted a pin-board looking thing that covered some of the boxes.

He felt the tingle in his feet.

"Damn it," he said. Matty stood and stamped his feet, trying to get the feeling of pins and needles from them. He continued to stomp as he went back to the stairs. Maybe there was something in the air down here that disagreed with him? Asbestos? Could asbestos make you have a fit? He needed to look it up on his phone.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the door at the top closed. Gently. He watched it. There was nobody there, and for a split second he thought that the wind must have taken it. But it slid closed slowly and latched, just as he had closed the bedroom door when he left Brooke upstairs. He was about to start up the stairs two at a time, when something behind him stopped him. He didn't know what, but it felt like there was someone there. Watching him.

He didn't move at first. Fear, perhaps, gripping him, but he knew—he *knew*—there wasn't—couldn't be—anybody behind him. He'd just been over there. Matty turned back into the room. There was nothing there. His eyes flitted from shadow to shadow. He felt so sure though, that there *was* something there.

The pain in his feet got worse.

He went to turn back to the door and was stopped. The shadows in the corner of the room. They looked like they were moving. Creeping like the light source was moving. Matty looked up to the light on the ceiling, like that might be moving and stretching the shadows in some way. *Stupid*. He took a step towards the shadow. He didn't know why. Instinct? An unhealthy fascination for knowledge?

A box moved. One box, at the bottom of the pile of boxes. It slid across the concrete floor of the basement just a couple of inches without disrupting the pile. It scared the shit out of him, like a jump scare in a fucking horror film. He felt his heart miss a beat. "Jesus Christ," he said. His thoughts jumped to the smell in the servant's quarters. *Rats*. He looked around and

grabbed hold of the broom that was leaning against the wall. He held it up the wrong way, wielding the brush in his hand and holding the handle out like a prodding stick. He poked the box as he slowly approached, expecting a four legged little fucker to come out at him. Well, maybe. He had no idea what a rat would do. Probably run deeper into the boxes. He jabbed at the box again. This time there was a reaction.

The boxes shuddered. The whole pile of them.

Matty backed up. Shock. Perhaps a little fear. He suddenly felt the need to piss, and he realised he was only wearing but very little.

The box tower moved, the boxes at the top tumbling to the sides, as if someone was suddenly bursting through the thing. Which there wasn't. But Matty still swung the broom handle at the approaching nothing, sticking it wildly into the air, colliding with boxes, pushing them away.

Nothing there.

Then the nothing seemed to grab him. He felt himself being restrained like there were a couple of really big guys behind him, taking his arms, maybe to *escort* him from a nightclub.

We'll do this the hard way.

It was a voice, of that he was sure, but it had come from everywhere. It was all around him. It had spoken in hushed whisper, but it was a woman. He was *sure* it was a woman's voice. Matty pulled against the force, the pressure that was holding him. Neither arm had anything there—nothing to see, just an unseen force holding him tight. "Who's there?" he asked through gritted teeth. "Let me go." *But there was nothing there*. He knew he was being held by his own madness. It was the only thing that made any sense.

Dragged around to face the stairs, Matty was pulled backwards to the table, his feet being dragged as they bounced on the floor. "Help," he said. His voice spewed out quietly. He was confused. His arse hit the table and it rattled under his weight, then he was pulled onto it. Across it. Like he was being pulled onto a gurney.

Or an operating table.

He struggled against whatever it was that held him there. It was stronger than he. He couldn't see it. What was it? Matty screamed out in fear, pain. Glancing down to his hand he could see his muscles straining in his arms as they fought. His feet kicking out, but finding nothing.

Then, pain.

From his arm. The left. Upper, near the shoulder. He craned his neck around as searing heat cut through him. His skin split from the inside of the elbow up the bicep and to the shoulder ball. Matt screamed as blood flowed from the cut, knife unseen. The skin was folded back, the pain unbearable. "Please," he screamed, "No." Invisible hands and fingers grabbed at what was inside. He saw the muscles being manipulated, pushed to the side, the veins dragged out of his body and held up like strings on a doll. He couldn't take his eyes from the grotesqueness of it all, even when he felt the same happening to the other arm.

He screamed again.

This time opening his eyes and sitting upright, still in bed.

"Fuck," he said, loud enough to bring Brooke out of her slumber.

"What is it?" she asked blearily.

Matty was shaking. His arms hurt like he'd been cramping. He could feel pins and needles in his feet, too. Sweat covered him, the sheets clung to him. "Huh?" he replied, getting his bearings. It was hot in the room.

Just a dream.

He swung his feet from the bed and rubbed his face. "Fucking shitty dream," he said, getting to his feet. He stumbled over to the radiator on the wall and felt it. It was only warm to the touch. The heating was off. He shook his head. *The fuck?* Matty went to the window and pushed it open. "I'll look at the heating in the morning."

C H A P T E R 7

Brooke's friend Nancy had jumped at the idea of exchanging a few hours painting for a weekend in the country. Matty had found it harder to persuade Luke and his little brother Evan, but they'd agreed to come—even pick up Nancy—so long as he Paypal'd them enough cash to pick up some weed and enough beer to drown a horse. Which he had.

Brooke had driven off to the village again to pick up enough supplies to feed the extra mouths, and she was going up to the industrial estate on the edge of Tonbridge to pick up some One Coat to paint the servants quarters.

That left Matty a few hours to lift the floorboards in the larger room and try to find out what the smell was.

He had doubts as he waved Brooke off down the driveway.

He'd obviously gotten a touch of something. Food poisoning, or the flu. Something was fucking with his head. *And that dream last night*. This morning he had found the heating turned down. Maybe he was sleepwalking? He picked up the toolkit that he'd already taken from the boot of the car and carried it into the house, through the kitchen and up the back stairs.

Now he'd smelt the thing, he couldn't get it out of his nose. He dropped the tools at the door to the room and opened the toolbox. He took the crowbar from the top and felt its weight. It should do. Matty kicked the small rug up, flipping the corner over, and then rolled it over and up with his foot. He pushed the end of the iron in between two of the floorboards and levered one up. It came up with some pushing, shoving, and swearing. The board splintered around the nail before it came up.

The stink flooded the room causing Matty to recoil. "Jesus wept," he muttered. He pulled his t-shirt up over his mouth to fake up a mask, and then peered into the hole. He couldn't see much. Didn't have a torch either.

"Damn it."

He lay on the floor and reached into the blackness of the gap below the floorboards, feeling around. As he lay there he realised that he hadn't put any gloves on. Then he hoped not to find anything as his fingers felt around. He should stop. Matty withdrew his arm from the hole and crawled over to the toolbox. He took out the only pair of gloves he had in there. They were glass fitter gloves. Good brand, seemed everlasting. He'd never fitted glass with them though.

Back at the hole he tried again from the other side.

Matty stuck his hand in the length of his arm, knowing there and then what it was like to be a vet. He wrenched his fist around to the right and touched something. It made him lurch back slightly. After the last couple of days, his nerves were shredded. He took a deep breath. "Fuck it." He steeled himself and grabbed whatever it was. Hard to tell through the gloves but it was soft. He dragged it under the floorboards to the gap. It was light, didn't weigh much.

The stench twisted his stomach, bile rising in his throat. "Fuckin', fuck fuck." He dragged the corpse of a crow from beneath the floor. The thing couldn't have been dead that long. Its feathers had been pulled back in a couple of places, like someone had tried to feather it for cooking and fucked it up. Or—he glanced at the hole in the floor—rats had gotten to it. The patches devoid of feathers were where the maggots had started gnawing at it. Holding it at arm's length, he covered his mouth and nose with the other hand and took it to the window, still open from yesterday, tossing it out over the roof.

He brought up some phlegm and gobbed it out the window. "Christ," he muttered, getting down to his knees and looking into the hole. He lay again and rummaged around in the gap before replacing the splintered board. It needed replacing but it would do for now.

Matty sighed and rocked back on his knees. He looked around the room. This would be one of the rooms they decorated over the weekend. Sure, it wasn't part of the main house—not yet at least—but the other rooms, the normal living space, didn't have this air of cultural suppression over it.

A sudden pain in the back of his head, Matty thought someone had come up behind him and whacked him at first. He rolled forward onto his stomach and then over onto his back. There was nothing there, but the spiking sensation of pain still lingered on the back of his head. He reached up, there was a lump. It stung to the touch. Matty got to his feet. He'd had enough of this. Something wasn't right up here …

… in this house.

He picked up the crowbar and tossed it into the top of the toolbox, and closed the lid, before picking it up and leaving the room. The walls of the hallway felt like they were closing in on him. The pain rose in the back of his head again. This time it nearly knocked him off his feet. He dropped the toolbox to the floor and cradled his head with his hands. Maybe he *was* sick. He tried to blink it away. Get down stairs and wait for Brooke to come back.

He felt like he was going to vomit. His heart seemed to be beating irregularly. Harder somehow. Palpitations. What was going on? It had always been colder up here—no heating—but somehow the temperature seemed to be dropping fast. It was so cold it bit at his skin. Gooseflesh rippling up his arms. Matty steadied himself on the walls around him, afraid he was going to fall down the narrow stairs in front of him.

Then she appeared.

A woman. Young. She was smiling. There was warmth in her face as it rippled, vaporous, translucent.

"I'm having a stroke," Matty said.

The woman held out her hand. She was beckoning him forward. Matty held his chest and glanced down to the steps. Her feet didn't reach them. She was an apparition floating off the floor. Matty backed away. "What?" It wasn't Shakespeare, but it was the best he manage right there and then. "Who are you?"

The woman drifted towards him. She was reaching out to him.

Something in the back of his mind stopped him from having a flight reaction. There was something about her, something attractive. He wasn't scared, no matter how much he thought he should be.

She was … beautiful.

She had long flowing hair that drifted in some unfelt wind. Her skin was smooth. There was something he recognised, but what, he couldn't quite finger. The woman—apparition, ghost, whatever—opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. Her motions disarmed him, he stopped backing away and let her drift closer to him. Not that he had anywhere to go. The quarters up here were a dead end.

Then she rushed at him.

Matty nearly fell backwards, stumbling over the toolbox and back to the room he'd come out of. She changed. She suddenly looked angry. She reached out towards him.

C H A P T E R 8

Brooke pushed the boot of the car open with her foot, grappling to keep hold of the two carrier bags of rollers and other such peripherals to decorate, when her phone started ringing. “Bloody hell,” she said, dropping the bags into the boot.

It was Nancy. She raised the phone to her ear. “’S up?”

Nancy explained that they were a little lost on how to get from Tonbridge to the house and Brooke told her that she was in the car park of B and Q in the industrial estate. She could hear papers being moved about and shuffled.

“Are you using an actual map?”

“What?” Nancy said into the phone.

“You’re phone’s got a GPS built into it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied, half-heartedly, focussing more attention on the map than anything else. “I see it. Luke—” More crushing paper sounds as she talked to Luke, who Brooke guessed was driving. “Yep. We are about thirty minutes out. Can you wait for us there?”

Brooke looked around. “Yeah, of course.” She stared around the car park until her eyes settled on an innocuous burger van sitting just near the road. Perfect.

—

Nancy rolled the cigarette around in between her fingers, giving the occasional audible tut. Brooke shook her head and ignored her. It was Matty’s car and if he didn’t want smoking in the car, then so be it.

She had the window open a crack and she stared out at the house as they approached. “Fell on your feet with this one, eh?”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “You know it’s not like that. I was a waitress, he was a struggling artist, I didn’t know that he was the Grand Earl of Dukesville and heir to the Tesco fortunes, did I?”

"No," she said. "But just sayin'." Nancy looked over to Brooke who hadn't taken her eyes from the road and laughed. "I'm just shittin' you. Are the boys behind us?"

Brooke looked in the mirror. "Yeah, they're still there. How was the trip down?"

Nancy dug around in the pockets of her cut down leather jacket and pulled out some gum, sliding the unlit cigarette in, in its place. "It was okay. They're all right, I suppose. Let me smoke in there, though, didn't they?"

Brooke didn't rise to it. "What do you think of them, though?" She gave Nancy a quick glance. "Either one take your fancy?"

"Shut your face," she snapped before looking thoughtfully out the window. "Well …" she giggled. "Did you see that stupid Bruce Willis film the other night? He played some stupid Russian mob boss or something."

"Oh, god. Yes. It was awful."

They pulled into the driveway and along. Brooke kept watching in the mirror to make sure that Luke and Evan had taken the same turn as the two of them talked shit about aging action stars. She noted that Luke, who was doing the driving, slowed as they entered the driveway, ever protective of the bodywork of his *baby*.

The two cars pulled up to the house and Brooke got out, watching Nancy as she almost fell out onto the tarmac and lit her cigarette. *Finally*, she had muttered. It wasn't like they'd been in the car more than thirty minutes or so.

Luke got out the driver's seat, leaving his brother in the car. Evan was only a few years younger than they were, and still fitted in as *one of the gang*, so to speak. He had his feet sticking out of the passenger window and was sucking on a joint. Luke came around to Brooke. "How's he taking it?" he asked.

Brooke shrugged. "Okay, I think. He seems a bit … distant, at times." She rested her hand on his forearm. "While I've got you for a minute …" She glanced up at the house to see if she could see Matty watching. She couldn't. "Matty ever talk to you about his childhood down here?"

Luke jutted his chin out. “Not really. I mean, we hooked up when we were what, six? Seven? It wasn’t exactly a topic of conversation. And when I tried to talk to him about it later—you know when we were older—he pretty much brushed me off. He fed me the same line as everyone else. *He was sent away to the seaside when he was little to live with his family*.” Luke looked up at the house. “But I never expected this. From all I could get out of him, I assumed his mum was a fucking loon, dad died young, and he was taken in. You know, like The Fresh Prince. When it came up that she’d popped her clogs, I expected him to be exactly one shitty flat and a stinky sofa richer. I didn’t expect him to own Downton Abbey.”

The doors to the house opened and Matty came out, arms wide, smile the same. “Guys,” he called, shot a look to Nancy, “Nance.”

“Don’t call me that,” She snapped back, grinning.

He walked straight to Brooke and pulled her close. “My lovely lady.” He kissed her on the cheek.

Confused a little by his sudden bout of joviality, Brooke glanced at Luke and raised her eyebrows, getting only a blank stare back. Matty was Matty again, for the first time since they’d gotten here.

The first time in weeks.

He slapped Luke on the shoulder. “Good drive?” Not waiting for a response, he went over to Evan and knocked on his feet before reaching in through the car window and taking the joint from his lips.

“Hey,” Evan half-heartedly protested.

Matty sucked on the joint. “Mine, I think.” He grinned cheesily.

—

Brooke pulled the next book from the shelf in the study and handed it off to Luke. He already had a book in his hand, open. “This shit’s weird,” he said. “This reads like a friggin’ manual. Like this stuff is real.”

“Right?” she replied. “I don’t know what they were up to here, but I don’t like it. I want to get the decorating done and get some of this shit out of here.”

Luke put the second book down and ran his finger over the page he was reading. “It says here that with the right sacrifices you can transcend the plain of death and live on. What a pile of wank.” He tossed the book back on the shelf. “I get it, but there’s nothing wrong with Matty. He’s fine. You’re fine. The house is fine. Okay, a little creepy, but I’ve seen a *lot* of horror films. I say we get shit faced with everyone else, smoke a ton of weed—I bought a ton with me, courtesy of the owner of said creepy house—sleep it off, paint some walls, and head back to town on Monday.” He made a clicking noise in his cheek and pointed at Brooke waiting for a response.

She nodded, unsure.

“Come on.” He took Brooke by the hand and led her out to the hall, as they followed the sound of laughter across to the living room. He let her hand drop before they got to the door.

Matty was sitting up one end of the sofa, Evan at the other, and Nancy was sitting cross-legged on the floor. “It’s cold in here,” she said.

Matty glanced at Brooke as she and Luke came in. He looked quickly to them both and then returned Nancy’s look. “I got it.” He stood, passing by Brooke, touching her hand gently with his as he did. She watched him go into the hall and over to the basement. He took the key out of his pocket and unlocked the door, disappearing onto the stairs beyond. She went over and took his space on the sofa. Nancy was right, it was cold in here. Brooke looked at Evan. “So what were we talking about?”

“Well,” Evan said. “For a start, the TV only has two channels.” He picked up the remote and flicked it on. The screen flickered slightly as it awoke. “You have to wait a second. But get this.” He pointed to it.

The picture brightened, and appeared. It was black and white. Hazy, white noise, with a picture behind it. The TV was too new to show white noise. It was part of the transmission.

“I’ll turn the sound up.” Evan pointed the remote at the screen.

“Don’t,” said Nancy.

He glanced at her and smiled, pushing the button.

The volume bar on the TV went up and all that could be heard was crying.

Brooke stared into the screen. She could just about make out an old woman in the picture, her face, framed in head and shoulders, and she was crying. Wailing. “What is it?” she asked.

“No idea.” Evan turned the volume back down. “But that’s all that is on the channel. I don’t even see where it’s looping either, but it must be. She just stands there and cries.”

“Great. You said there were two channels. What’s on the other one?”

Evan flicked the channel over. “Eastenders.”

“Ugh. I’d rather watch the crying woman.”

Evan laughed and flicked the TV off, throwing the remote onto the sofa cushion. “So now what? Truth or dare?” He looked at Nancy, and they both burst out laughing.

“I’ll go and put the pizza in the oven, if I can work out how to turn it on.” Brooke started towards the kitchen.

“I’ll help.” Matty came back in from the hall. “Heatings on. It should warm up soon.”

C H A P T E R 9

They passed the joint amongst themselves, the five of them flopping on and around the single sofa. “Yes.” Luke pointed at Nancy. “But did you know that when me and Matty here were at university—”

“—art school,” Matty interrupted.

“—whatever.” Luke moved his point to Matty, then returned it to Nancy. “When me and Matty were at *art school*, we were in a car accident, that left one of us in a coma for three days? *And* the one in said coma was moi.”

Nancy stood and took a swig from the whiskey bottle before sliding it back on the coffee table carefully. “All right.” She unbuttoned the front of her jeans.

“Easy tiger,” Luke said, averting his eyes.

“Shut the fuck up,” she slurred. She dragged her jeans down to her knees, and pointed at the scar that ran from her kneecap, up, and disappeared into her knickers.

Evan stared at her leg until Brooke nudged him. “Say something then,” she whispered. “Creep.”

“How?” he asked.

“Bike accident. Slid off my two-fifty doing a ton down the M1.”

Evan raised his eyebrow. “Shit,” he said, quietly.

Brooke slipped her legs off the sofa and placed her hand on Matty’s shoulder. He was staring into the fireplace. “Where ever you’ve drifted off to, it’s time to come back. Come on.” She stood up and put her hand out for him. He took it and pulled himself up.

“Time for bed,” he said.

“Wimp.” Evan grinned. “Getting old?”

“Cheeky shit,” said Brooke.

"Yeah." Luke slapped his foot. "Anyway." He passed the joint back to Evan. "I'm going to hit the sack too." He got to his feet and shook the sleep —and weed—from his head. His gaze moved from Evan to Nancy. "You two behave."

"Oi," Nancy said.

Evan just looked uncomfortable.

"*And* you two," Luke gestured in the direction of Brooke and Matty, before stumbling off towards the stairs.

"Can you find it?" Matty called.

Luke waved his hand back at them. Of course he could. He stumbled on the stairs, taking a grip on the bannister. He needed to be more careful mixing booze with weed. His little brother was right. Maybe he was getting old. He snorted under his breath as he made the top of the stairs. No. He was in his prime. He pushed himself away from the stairs and towards the bedroom at the end. Apparently Matty's mum's old room.

He kept one hand on the wall as he walked to keep balance. He could hear Matty and Brooke saying goodnight downstairs. Luke hoped that Evan wouldn't just sit on his hands with Nancy. She was okay. She could teach him a thing or two.

He pushed open the door to the bedroom, nearly falling over his overnight bag that he'd dumped up there earlier. "Stupid thing," he muttered kicking it to the side. He pushed up against the door as he closed it, waiting for the room to stop spinning, managing to flick the light on. "Fucking hell," he muttered. "Never again."

Luke wobbled over to the bed and sat. He held his head in his hands, breathing out slowly.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, swinging himself onto the pillow and lying flat. He daren't open his eyes—not at least until the weed wore off a little, and he was only drunk. He bravely opened his eyes and focussed on the light in the centre of the ceiling. He was going to have to get up and turn that off soon. He lolled his head to the side and looked at the lamp on the bedside table. He should turn that on. Then go and turn the

other one off. But his eyelids were getting surprisingly heavy. Maybe he could just close them for a moment. Then do the lights.

He let them close.

Just for a second.

He opened them. The light burnt his eyes. He lifted his hand over them like he was at a match and protecting his eyes from the sun. The room wasn't spinning. That was something. Luke kept blinking as he squinted, hoping that he could get up in a moment. The back of his head thumped a little. He wondered if he had nodded off when he closed his eyes. He closed them again and focussed on listening.

He couldn't hear anything.

Maybe he had dropped off and everyone had gone to bed? Maybe without him and Matty, Brooke, in the room Evan had something else on his mind? The thought raised a cheeky smile. As long as he was careful.

He opened his eyes again as the light seemed to dim, his eyes adjusting. He thought he saw something in the glare. Something small, movement. It was enough for him to start, and get up on his elbows.

Confronted by a woman standing at the end of the bed, Luke opened his mouth. He didn't know what was going to come out of it when he started to open it. He was alarmed that someone had entered his room, sure, but she was beautiful. And naked. There was little more disarming in this world, at least to Luke, than a naked woman.

"Who are you?" he asked. He surprised himself by the quiet subtlety that came from him. She just smiled at him, reaching forward and touching his foot at the end of the bed. It was odd. He still had his shoes on, and she was … caressing them. He withdrew his foot slowly. She raised a finger to her lips in a shushing motion.

Luke frowned at her.

She rounded the foot of the bed and walked up the side of it to him. He watched. Dumbfounded. She walked slowly, deliberately. She was both elegant and, well, naked, all at the same time. Luke didn't know what to say, so said nothing. She was stunning. Her breasts were heavy, her hair was

dark, long. She was unshaven. He liked that. She stopped at the top of the bed and leaned down, towards him, as if she was going to kiss him. Luke closed his eyes and waited eagerly for the touch.

As she got closer he felt a coolness on his face. A tension in his throat. Luke reached up and wrapped his fingers around his neck. Something was there, pressuring him … inside … somehow. He opened his eyes. She was there, smiling, a maniacal grin. He shouted out but all that came from his lips was a hoarse, stunted call. His vocal chords crushed, pain leeched from his neck out into the rest of his body.

She stood, still an image of beauty, but her face dowsed in sadness.

And anger.

Luke grabbed at his stomach as burning pain encompassed his body. He tried to scream. He clawed at his clothes pulling his shirt up. His skin underneath was peeling from him like it was recovering from the blaze of the sun, but with it came a scorching. Flaying. His skin started to bubble, to turn white, splitting, pus oozing from beneath. He reached down and pressed his fingers against it, and they went through him, into his flesh and beyond, destroying the skin. Pulling his clothes away from the pain as it rode across his body, brought new meaning to agony. The fabric stuck to his skin, tearing the flesh from his muscles as they cooked in place, his meat falling from the bone like a greased brisket.

Luke rolled on the bed, his flesh sticking to the sheets, blood bubbling from the wounds as it steamed in the heat. Smoking. Weak whines coming from his dead mouth as his face became an unrecognisable mush of crackling and rind and burnt sinew and cooked fat.

C H A P T E R 1 0

Nancy woke with a start. She was still laying on the sofa, where she had fallen asleep. Evan was spooned up behind her, between her and the back of the sofa, his arm around her. She could hear him snoring, gently. Cutely.

She lifted his arm from her torso and rolled quietly from his grasp onto the rug. He didn't wake. She was hungry. She got to her knees and studied him for a moment, before her stomach growled a little. The kitchen. She got to her feet. A little wobbly—just an after effect—and kicked her shoes off. Luckily they'd fallen asleep with the lights on.

Nancy crept across the room to the hallway and out, down to the kitchen.

She pulled the fridge door open and dragged the cling film from the leftover pizza. She poked at the pieces trying to decide which one to take, before taking the plate over to the table and resting it down. She lifted the chair out from under the table so as not to scrape it on the stone flooring and wake the whole house, before she slipped into it, taking the top slice of pizza and chowing down.

The desire after some weed was strong.

Nancy smiled as the hunger subsided. She finished the slice, and then another. Covering the plate back up, she returned it to the fridge and left the kitchen. It was colder now and the temptation was to creep up the stairs and go to bed. She stood there at the bottom of the stairs looking between the door to the living room where Evan was, and the stairs, bed, and warmth. She decided on Evan. Maybe she should take him up there with her?

—

Evan gently opened his eyes. They were heavy. That was the weed. The alcohol. Nancy was standing over him, watching him sleep. That was sweet. She was smiling. It wasn't a deep smile, but something serene. Sedate. Her lips curled only the smallest amount. She stepped forward and slid over him, straddling him at his hips. Evan opened his eyes wider, and made a

pronounced effort not to get a hard-on. She didn't speak. She just placed her hands on his chest, flat, and leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

Her lips were cold.

She made a sound like she was eating something chocolatey and smooth and then she leaned back.

It made his cock twitch. He reached forward, cupping her breasts, smiling.

Nancy touched his cheek with the fingers on her left hand and gently caressed his skin down to his neck, inside the collar of his shirt. She did the same with her other hand, until her fingers were on his neck, swirling. Evan shifted his weight, trying to move his hardness from under her, straining, and in a little pain. Then she gripped his shirt and tore the front of it open, revealing his chest, bereft of hair. He took a sharp intake of breath, continuing to caress her. His hands and fingers explored the outside of her clothes. She leaned down and bit his nipple, just a snick, but enough for him to venture somewhere between pleasure and pain. He whispered that she was his God.

And she was.

Evan's hands quickly found their way beneath her shirt and to her skin, her flesh, cool, clammy. Her breasts firm. Young. "I want you," he muttered. "I have one, in my pocket." He let go of Nancy's breast and plunged his hand into the tight pocket of his jeans for the condom he had there, but she stopped him, pulling his hand out and placing it back, under her clothes.

"You are a feisty one," she said quietly. Evan smiled as she reached down between his legs and gripped his cock, hard through his jeans as he played with her breasts. He was fumbling a little with inexperience, and he knew it. But he didn't care.

Nancy leaned forward and kissed him again, this time more deeply, holding her mouth to his, her tongue exploring the inside of his mouth. Then deeper. He could feel her tickling the back of his mouth, and while somewhat impressed by the length and girth of her tongue, it was close to finding his gag reflex. He tried to pull back, but the arm of the sofa stopped him, the tongue now roaming like a gargantuan proboscis.

It lunged like a snake, finding its way down into Evan's throat. It stopped the air. It stopped the scream.

Evan tried to pull away from her, pushing at her, his hands still mid-fondle, before they too became entangled in something more. Then Nancy pulled away from him, back to straddling him. But it wasn't her any longer.

Another woman was there. Young. Beautiful. But different. Extending from her mouth was a tendril, an alien arm, sliding—throbbing—from her, into him. He could feel it extending, travelling down into him, probing his insides.

He couldn't breathe. His chest burned.

Nancy—not *Nancy*—this *other* woman pulled her shirt up and over her head, and where the ripe young breasts that Evan had been able to feel should have been were two arms, extending from the body, hands holding his wrists … hands with long, dirty, nails, callouses, and verrucous lesions, red and inflamed.

He tried to scream, but there was no air.

The proboscis inside him flicked from side to side, boring with the natural curves of his throat and deciding to find its own way. It tore at Evan's insides, pushing against his heart as it beat slower and slower without air. He felt the monstrous worm shoving his lungs to the side, the first of them collapsing. Then it pushed up and out. The trunk of the woman tore itself through Evan's chest plate, spewing blood up into the air, over the woman's naked body, like a geyser ejaculating months of pent-up frustration.

—

Nancy walked to the door, her footfalls silent in just her socks. She peeked around the door, equally wanting to grab Evan by the hair and drag him up to the bedroom, *and* snuggle back into his warm embrace without waking him.

She stood at the door and leaned her head around.

Evan lay on the sofa, dead. There was blood everywhere.

Everywhere.

Nancy screamed.

C H A P T E R 1 1

Someone had unzipped Evan from his groin to his chin. Gashed open and bleeding still, his corpse twitched feverishly. He was still on the sofa. His clothes torn open, much like his skin. His insides, guts, spewed from the wound and blood pooled in a circle emanating out from the sofa like someone had dropped a bottle of cherryade on the rug. But it didn't stop there.

Whatever had done it had made a mess. The blood and gore splattered from the body, across the room, on the walls. Even some on the ceiling. It looked like a Lovecraftian crime scene.

Nancy's scream had roused Matty and Brooke. The two of them bounded down the stairs to her side. She just stood there at the doorway, staring in at Evan, her hands over her mouth.

Matty came by her and stood at her side. He stared at the body, as Brooke took Nancy in her arms. "What is it?" Brooke asked. She hadn't seen. She hadn't looked.

Matty took a small step back. He wanted to ask what had happened but the words weren't there. There was nothing there except for the feeling of sickness that rode over him. Then the thought of Luke came to his mind. He turned around a looked up the stairs half expecting him to be standing there. Thankfully he wasn't. Maybe he hadn't heard Nancy's scream. Matty turned to Nancy. He took her by the shoulder, pulling her from Brooke's arms. "What happened?" he asked. She just stared at him, and a sudden wave of anger broke out of him. He squeezed her shoulders, digging his fingers into her flesh. "What the fuck happened?" he asked again, this time harsher, accusingly.

She tried to wriggle free from his grip.

Brooke tried to pull him off. "Hey," she said, a voice of reason. Quiet. Sincere.

Matty pushed her away, before returning his attention back to Nancy. "Tell me." He let go of her shoulders and shoved her into the door frame.

Her head bounced off the wood with a *thunk*.

"What the fuck?" Brooke got between them. "What are you doing?" She shot a glance over to Evan. To his corpse. She let a sharp intake of breath be her only action before taking Nancy by the arms and leading her away from Matty's reach. "What happened?" she asked her quietly.

Nancy was sobbing. She was shaking uncontrollably like hypothermia was kicking in.

Matty approached Evan. The smell of blood, iron, it overtook the room, was nauseating. He held his hand over his mouth. What should he do? Check his pulse like they did in the films or something. He stepped back as the blood pooled further out from the sofa. There was no point, he realised. He turned and glanced at Nancy and Brooke. They'd moved over and were sitting on the stairs, Nancy crying uncontrollably into Brooke's shoulder. Matty stepped passed them onto the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Brooke asked quietly.

"I left my phone in the bedroom." He stopped and looked up the stairs. "And keep your voice down. I don't want to wake Luke."

Matty took off up the stairs two at a time. He was bare foot, and moving quietly was easy. Glad to get away from the smell, he used the time alone to think. He'd never seen anything like it. Surely Nancy couldn't have done it? Sure, she was stoned off her block when they went up to bed a couple of hours ago, pissed as a fart, but there was no way she was capable of that. He paused at the top of the stairs and looked over the bannister to Brooke, still comforting Nancy. He suddenly didn't want to leave her there with Nance. Just in case. He looked down the hall to the room Luke was asleep in. No. He had to get his phone and the police here as soon as possible. If Luke awoke and saw that, who knew what he might do.

Matty went along the hallway and ducked into his and Brooke's room. He slid the door shut and went over to the bed, sitting. He took in deep breaths, picking his phone up from the bedside table and holding onto it like a lifeline. He realised that he was shaking as well. *Police*, he said in his head, over and over. It occurred to him that in all these years he'd never

actually called *999*. Swiping the phone to bring up the keypad, he punched in the code to unlock it.

"Stop."

A woman's voice. It made it his heart miss. "The fuck," he said, quietly.

"Language," she snapped.

Matty looked up over the lip of the phone and to Iris, standing there in front of the door, still closed. "Mum." The words floated from his lips like he hadn't really said them. "Mum," he repeated at he stared at her. She was how he remembered her, at least, through the fog that clouded time. Memories from so many years ago.

She smiled. "Matthew Leon Burns," she said. "You've grown."

Before he knew what he was doing he replied, "Matty. It's Matty these days."

"Son," she said, crossing the room to him.

He withdrew instinctively. "Who—" He stopped himself from asking. He could see who she was. It was just impossible. He realised he still had the phone in his hand and had only dialled the first two numbers. She put her hand across the phone and pulled it gently from his hands. He could have stopped her. There was no force in the gesture, but he wasn't of the mind.

"No," she said. "You need to stay here with me." She leaned forward and kissed him. It began tenderly on the lips, a mother touching a son that she hadn't felt the warmth of in time, then it became harder. She was forcing herself onto him.

Matty tried to pull away, but she had placed her hand around the back of his neck, holding him tight.

Her tongue pushed against the lips of his closed mouth.

He grunted, groaning, trying to object, that she was pushing too hard, but his fight pushed her forward, her determination growing. She managed to part his lips, her tongue feeding into his mouth, raping it. With no other choice he swung he fist into her gut. She took it like a champ, barely flinching with the blow.

She opened her eyes and looked into his. He could see the joy in them. He could see that she was getting what she wanted as she invaded him. She pulled away, long enough for him to take a breath.

"Come to mummy," she said, quietly. Seductively.

She was on him. Over him. He could feel her touching him as she crawled on him, pushing him back onto the bed like a desperate lover. She forced her lips onto his again, pulled at his clothes. He tried to push her off but she had the strength of eleven men. He punched at her, and clawed. He couldn't breath with her pushed up on him like this. He had to get away. His chest was starting to hurt.

And then as quickly as she had appeared in the room, she was … in him. Invading him. He couldn't move. Speak. Pain raptured across his face as he felt his mind shrinking into himself. His feet … he could feel the blistering pain moving up them again, overtaking his body like he was stroking out … but that wasn't all …

He was changing.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Brooke moved her head away from Nancy, and looked up the stairs when she heard movement, praying it wasn't Luke. Matty stood on the landing. He was looking down at the two of them. Nancy was still weeping. Brooke frowned at him, trying to ask him silently what was going on, but it seemed the meaning in her look was lost on him. He returned her look, staring into her eyes, but gave no meaning in it, before starting down towards them.

Brooke looked from his one hand to another. "Where's your phone?" she hissed, as if Nancy wouldn't hear. Nancy didn't move from her position.

Matty walked by them, into the hallway and across towards the front door.

"Matty," Brooke snapped. "What's going on?" It was like he was spaced out. Monged on something stronger than weed. Shock perhaps?

He pulled the front door open and looked out into the night, facing away from them. Brooke could see him moving, breathing. Then he turned back to them. "Get out," he said.

Brooke just stared at him, and Nancy looked up, acknowledging him for the first time since he returned down the stairs. "What's he talking about?" she wheezed, snot running from her nose and onto her lips.

Matty just stood there, holding the door. Finally he gestured as a doorman would. *Out you go*.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Brooke shouted at him. "Look at him," she said, pointing into the living room. "We need to call for help."

Matty left the door open and crossed to the doorway. He looked at Evan and nodded. "One of my finer works." He spun on his heal back to face the door, and marched out of it, with one finger held up in some sort of eureka motion. He disappeared out into the night.

Brooke let Nancy nestle her head back into her shoulder. "What the fuck was that?" she asked. Brooke watched the door silently.

Shortly, maybe three minutes later, Matty returned. He was dragging an axe behind him. Brooke immediately shook Nancy off her and stood, as Matty raised the axe up, his hand on one end of the hilt the other holding the wood just below the blade.

"What's that for?" Brooke asked quietly.

Matty bounced the axe like he was weighing it up in his grip. "Get the fuck. Out."

"This isn't funny." Brooke looked around, confused, pulling at Nancy's arm at the same time to get her up.

Matty caressed the hilt of the axe. "I said, get the fuck out of my house." He didn't wait for a response this time. "Actually," he continued. He raised the axe up as it he was going to chop wood. "It really doesn't matter." He brought the axe down, slamming it into the floor, carving through into the wood, cleaving the rug apart. He was nowhere near Brooke and Nancy, but that didn't stop Nancy from screaming the house down. Brooke dragged her up to her feet and started to back up the stairs, still facing Matty.

"What are you doing?"

Matty was busy yanking on the handle of the axe, muttering under his breath, trying to release it from the floorboard.

Nancy finally seemed to get her shit together enough to let go of Brooke and become something less of a burden. She was up, under her own weight and standing next to Brooke on the stairs. "I don't like this," she said between sobs. "Let's go."

Brooke nodded slowly as Matty got the axe from the floor and looked back up to the two of them. He had a look in his eyes, one that Brooke had only seen on him when she was naked. He was hungry. Only this time, she wasn't sure what he was looking at eating. She turned back on the stairs and ran upwards, grabbing Nancy by the elbow and towing her up. "Come on," she barked.

Nancy charged up the stairs behind her and the two of them hit the landing running. "In there." She pointed to the last room on the right. "You take that one, I'll take this one." She leaned up against the door on the left

and watched the stairs as Brooke ran down to the last door. She opened it and gave a glance to Nancy. They nodded quickly and both disappeared into their respective rooms to hide.

C H A P T E R 1 3

Nancy closed the door behind her slowly enough that it wouldn't be heard. She could see the shadow cast by Matty as she did, as it loomed up the stairwell on the wall. The door latched, she turned into the room. It was the bathroom. Great. She should have thought more about this.

She fumbled with the latch. Broken. *Fuck*.

Over at the sink she opened the medicine cabinet door. Nothing of use. She picked up Matty's safety razor. It looked like he'd been using the same one for years. It wasn't going to cut butter. She dropped it into the sink. There was a creak of a floorboard. He was in the hallway outside the door.

Nancy shrunk into the corner. She looked into the toilet bowl below her. Floater. Fucking hell. She picked up the safety razor. It was better than nothing.

She waited.

The knob twisted, the door creaking as it opened. Matty pushed the door inwards, opening it towards her. Nancy looked him straight in the eyes.

He looked different.

He looked like someone else.

She raised the razor like a knife and screamed as she charged at him. Letting out an, "*Ahhh*," that would have put William Wallace to shame, she burst across the room intent on impaling him with the plastic handle, if nothing else.

Matty looked a little surprised as she started. But he seemed to shake it off pretty sharp, as she got within reach, he wrenched his elbow around snatching her on the upper arm hard. Hard enough to knock her from her feet.

Nancy, half pushed, half slipping on the tiled floor of the bathroom, trunked arse over tit into the bath. She cracked her head on the tiles and her shoulder made a strange sound not unlike the sound of someone chewing

gristle as it moved into an awkward and considerably painful angle. “Fuck,” she screamed, rolling onto her back. Matty was standing over her looking at her like someone watching a puppy falling down stairs. Pity, mixed with humour. She stabbed up toward his head with the razor still held firmly in her grip. She collided with the side of his head, causing him to tumble—a little—to the side. She looked down at the razor, which had snapped in half. She tossed the half of it away that she still held and pulled herself up to her feet as Matty regained some composure.

“Bitch,” he said.

“Cunt,” she riposted. She lunged from the bath, arms out like Superman, and grabbed hold of Matty, knocking him backwards, and for a split second, the thought of getting out of this in one piece crossed her mind.

Matty crashed into the door, his head bouncing off the hardwood. He let out a sound like a shit horror movie scream queen.

Nancy flailed, trying to keep her footing, but fell forward, onto her knees on the bathmat. She felt her knees go. That weakness that bones got when you drank too much and smoked too much? Even at her age she was afflicted, and when her knees took her weight she knew that she wasn’t getting up. A burning hotter than Hell itself fired across her legs as her kneecap on the left leg spun out of place. She looked down as saw the bone jutting out to the side as the pain flared to an unbearable level. At least the bone wasn’t sticking out of her skin. Right? She looked up to Matty as he straightened over her.

He still held the axe firmly.

Nancy looked at the door. Maybe Brooke had heard her scream of attack and was coming to help, bursting into the bathroom around the corner at the last second to save the day.

Brooke wasn’t there.

She looked back up at Matty, stood over her smiling, his legs spread wide as he got his balance. He was caressing the axe handle as he lifted it like he was standing over firewood. Nancy sighed. At least it was going to be quick.

Matty slammed the axe down as hard as he could.

He missed Nancy's head, which is what she had assumed was going to be her last thought. *He's going to axe me in the head*. She was right. Her head was his intended target, but he missed.

The head of the axe slid through Nancy's clavicle, the sheer weight of it driving it through to the muscle and down, sliding out of the body with no control. Then her arm fell off. Blood gushed from her shoulder as her body crumpled to the floor. She would have put her arm out to stop herself, but, well, you know. Nancy lost consciousness soon thereafter.

Shock.

Matty turned and stalked out of the bathroom. He kicked Nancy's arm without thought as he passed, but it rolled out of the door, into the hallway and onto the carpet. Like a beer can kicked by a kid in the street. He nodded at it, and turned back down the hall.

C H A P T E R 1 4

Brooke had nodded to Nancy and slid backwards into the room, before closing the door as quietly as she could. She leaned her forehead against the wood as she tried to think. She needed to get out of the house. She turned into the room and her eyes fell on Luke, lying half on the bed and half on the floor. She had completely forgotten about him. He was dead.

Of course he was.

He looked like chopped fucking liver. How had anything done that to him without them hearing?

Brooke put her hands over her mouth as if to stifle a scream, but as with Evan being butterflied downstairs, seeing Luke lying there in a similar way, she didn't find it that bad, really. She let her hands drop from her mouth and approached him. She got close enough to be sure that he was dead, and then turned back to the door.

There was a scream.

Brooke reached for the door handle and then thought twice about it. What if Nancy was in trouble? There was an angel on her shoulder screaming out for her to open the fucking door. She grabbed the handle and pulled the door inwards, sticking her head out into the hallway in time to see an arm roll across the floor on the carpet. "Fucking hell," she whispered, slipping her head back into the room. She held the door closed and glanced around for a weapon. Nothing of much use. She ducked down and pulled open the bag on the floor. Luke's. She grabbed the only thing in it that might have been any use. A twelve inch glass bong. She held it like a short sword. It would have to do. She pulled the door open and burst into the hallway, startling Matty, judging by the look on his face. He was stood in the centre of the hallway with the axe in one hand casually slung over one shoulder. "What the fuck do you *want*?" she screamed at him.

He shook his head. "Me? This is my house you wretched shit squirting whore." He smiled coyly and raised his free hand over his lips. "Sorry," he said. "Do forgive my candor."

Brooke looked weak. “Matty,” she said, pitifully.

“Matty?” Matty shook his head. “Oh no, my dear. Matthew has taken his leave. I’m his mother.”

Brooke dropped her head down to one side. “Well aren’t we a bitch?” she asked.

“You foul mouthed money chasing daughter of a pig.”

“Better a pig’s daughter than a cunt.”

Matty wrinkled his nose up. “You girls keep saying that. It’s disgusting.”

Brooke lifted the bong above her head and charged with a war-cry to match that of Dutch fighting a predator. Matty again looked surprised. He had barely managed to get the weight of the axe from his shoulder, overestimating his strength, when Brooke reached him. She drove the bong into his face. It was a blow out of desperation and she did regret it.

But needs must.

The thick glass shattered, knocking Matty from his feet, shards of broken glass sticking out from his flesh, the weight of the axe helping to take him over. Brooke went to run, but paused. She turned the bong around like a stake and thrusting it downwards to impale Matty where he lay.

Matty rolled off to the side, frantically swinging the axe in his hand, the bong never landed its target. Instead, Matty managed to knock Brooke from her feet. She wailed as she struggled back to stand. Anger rushed through her.

Matty fought to try to get to his feet.

Brooke weighed up her options, and frankly, they were all shitty, so she hurled the broken bong at Matty and ran passed him to the stairs and started down. Matty brushed the bong away as shards of glass bounced harmlessly from him and he charged down the hallway after her.

“Fuck it. Fuck it. Fuck it,” Brooke mantra’d as she shot down the stairs, Matty close on her heals. She glanced at the open front door, quickly deciding that she wasn’t going to be able to outrun him, especially not outside. Plus it was dark. Pitch black away from the light of the house. She

held onto the knob on the end of the bannister and hurled herself around it. She could hear Matty's feet as they thudded against the stairs.

He was so close.

Brooke crashed through the closest door. On to the basement stairs. She mashed her hand on the light switch but didn't manage to flick it, so she kept moving in the dark. Downwards, slamming the door behind her, but not even stopping to see if she could lock it or stop him from coming through in any way. She plunged through the blackness, nearly leaving her feet when she reached the bottom of the stairs and she hit the flat concrete floor, unseen. She turned, flailing in the dark.

Then light gushed down from the doorway as Matty opened it. The light from the hallway beyond first, and then the light as Matty turned on the light switch. "You damaged my baby boy's face," Matty said.

Brooke could hear him coming down the stairs toward her. Two steps followed by a pronounced *thunk*.

She looked around the basement. There was little weapon-wise. Furniture. Brooke's eyes fell on the pile of kitchen equipment. She ran over and grabbed the first thing she saw. Two handles and a rusty curved blade between them. Some sort of herb cutter from before the war. The one with the Roundheads by the look of it. She turned and faced the stairs, the shadow of Matty looming across the floor. He reached the bottom of the stairs and looked at her, holding the axe behind him where he had dragged it down the stairs. "Matty, baby, you gotta fight this. You gotta come back to me."

Matty shook his head, looking up to the ceiling of the basement with some awe in his look. "It is not that simple, whore. This house, *this house*, this is what has your beau. Not me. Not this old woman. But the house. The family home. It was Matty's father's fault, I think, but that was so long ago. When he was dabbling in the occult," he said quietly. He looked at the floor, dismayed. "It was when I sent him away. To live with my sister. She understood, but she never said anything. And then George …" He looked up and met Brooke's gaze. "… Matty's father—he did something to make the

house want to live through the family. I tried to keep him away. I thought it would die with me. But it didn't. You've seen The Exorcist, right?"

Brooke was taken aback by the sudden question, shrugging a vague agreement.

Matty nodded. "Normally you see a change in the physical being and the mind is taken over by something inherently evil, but in this case the house wouldn't let me die and I …" He looked to the side, there was regret in his face. "… I brought back something on my shoulder. Something evil." He looked back to Brooke. "And I can't control … me."

"So he's not in there anymore?"

Matty shrugged, sticking his bottom lips out. "No fucking idea. But we'll not find out."

Brooke broke into a run without warning, charging at Matty with him still holding the axe to the floor. "*Fucker!*" she screamed, waving the herb cutter at him like her life depended on it. Which it did, really.

She smashed the rusty blade into Matty's arm as he fought to lift the axe, still unsure of his own capabilities. The ancient blade was still true and it slashed deep into his flesh without effort. He yelled out, grabbing at his arm and falling backwards, onto the stairs. Brooke trampled him to get to the top of the stairs, smashing her foot into his face. She heard the cracking of what she expected was his nose breaking. Maybe teeth.

He cried out again.

Brooke charged up the stairs and out into the hallway. She slammed the door behind her. The key was in the lock. She turned it and slipped it out into her pocket.

"Bitch," the voice came from behind the door. "Let me out." The handle rattled.

"Fuck that, and fuck you." Brooke backed away from the door. "It's this fucking house, you say?" She left the hallway going into the living room, ignoring Evan's desecrated body on the couch, and going over to the log fire. She scooped up the packet of matches in the hearth. "Fuck this house," she muttered.

Brooke ran upstairs to hers and Matty's bedroom and retrieved the car keys, before returning to the ground floor. She went into the kitchen and turned the gas on, on the AGA, letting the vapour flow freely into the room.

Then she went across the hallway to the study.

She could hear Matty banging on the door, hard. He wasn't getting through though. She crossed to the bookcase and started pulling books from the shelves, creating an unlit bonfire pyre on the floor. Once it reached a reasonable level, she took the matches and lit one, resting the flame against the flopped open pages of the books—books used to create the inorganic life that now lived by the house, in Matty. She could hear him screaming as the fire took.

Brooke got out of the house and into the Mondeo. She started the engine and pulled away, into the darkness of the driveway.

The car rode from side to side, sliding off the bushes, barely staying in a straight line, as the first explosion rocked it. Brooke slammed her foot onto the brakes and the car slid to a halt. She looked in the mirror at the house, a raging bonfire, as flames licked from the windows on the ground floor, from the open front door.

She watched, waiting to see if Matty was going to run from the flames.

The End

M E A T C U T E

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

The lights of the cars passing outside the restaurant illuminated the spots of rain on the window, as Amelia sat nursing her glass of cola. Fucking cola. She was sitting facing the wall next to the bar so that she could watch Damian, as he sat on one of the barstools chatting with a young blonde woman. She was pretty. Probably in her late twenties—maybe early thirties. She was flirting with him.

Amelia was also: looking out the window; looking at the wallpaper that was peeling from the wall near the skirting board; keeping an eye on the *gentleman* with the bald patch who was sitting in the window and definitely eyeing her; keeping a watchful look on the BBC news running silently on the TV behind the bar; *and* drinking fucking cola.

Damian's unmistakable laugh brought her attention back to him. He was twisting the glass in his right hand around in a circle. It was a gentle movement, and somewhat hypnotic. As well he knew. The blonde had noticed too. She was watching his movements and flicking her hair back, and touching her face. It was probably subconscious, anyway. If she knew that Damian was going to let her leave with him, she could have dropped all pretence as quickly as she was planning on dropping her knickers. *Fucking whore*. Amelia sipped on her cola. That fucking pervert in the window wasn't even trying to pretend he wasn't watching her.

He was probably nearly there, she thought to herself. Damian, not the pervert. The tart was practically throwing herself at him now.

It was understandable. Damian was well practiced in his seductions. Well enough to almost always get what he wanted. *Almost*. Amelia closed her eyes. He was probably in the middle of lavishing some long story on her where he was the hero—in name only … no one likes a braggart—and he would plant a twist in the tale where she would turn out to be an angel in it. Some soppy shit like that. It worked surprisingly well, sticky, tacky, stupid, pickup lines that were ironic. Who would believe it in this day and age? Anyway, after that he would break the news to Blondie about *her*. Poor little Amelia sitting in the corner. He'd signal her over.

Then there would be three.

She hated this bit. Not the bar. No. That was fine. It was the waiting. The cola. She'd asked him once—not so long ago—why it was him on the

hunt, and not her. Why not both of them? She could pick up the man with the bald spot, while he worked on Blondie. They could get a cab.

Winner, winner. Chicken dinner.

As it were.

But he'd said no. He said that it was easier for them to pick up a woman. Women were more pliable, he'd said. What did he know? Clearly. No. It was that he didn't want to be the third wheel. That was all. He didn't want to be in this situation with another man.

But Amelia knew what would be easier still. Her and another woman. Two women to pick up one man. Now that would be easy. Christ, there would be none of this hour at the bar flirting. Spending time—and money—trying to persuade a woman that she really did want to go home with him *and* her. Two women? Walk up to a man at the bar. Pick one who is alone. A businessman in a hotel bar. Tell him it's his lucky day and they both want to fuck him. Maybe one in ten would put up a fight, perhaps think they were hookers or something, occasionally one would be gay. An easy mistake to make, and move along. The whole process would take less than ten minutes from entering the bar as two, and leaving as three. He'd even be easy to work with. She knew what men were like. He'd be all weak kneed at the thought of it alone, probably have trouble getting enough blood into his legs to make them work.

And no one would be stuck drinking fucking cola.

None of this sitting in the bar waiting, pretending to not be there while God almighty himself, gift to all women preys on someone at the bar. All the while some bald-spotted twat gapes at her. He could be a real pervert. Had Damian thought about that? While he was sitting there, sipping Sancerre, or whatever the fuck it was that he was drinking to impress Blondie. Twat might be planning on grabbing her. Killing her. *Raping* her.

She opened her eyes and he was looking at her. The two of them locked gazes, Amelia and Bald-Spot. She winked at him and he looked away. *Or maybe he was a run of the mill pervert*. He was probably staring at her to get a mental picture in his mind so he could fantasize about her later when he was alone. In bed. *Ugh*. She shuddered, and looked across the bar to Damian who waved her over.

Oh.

It was time.

Amelia nodded at Bald-Spot and slipped out of the chair. It was one of those bucket chairs that were really hard to get out of while maintaining any grace or style, especially when you were wearing a short, tight skirt, which she was. Far easier to spread your legs and give any spying bald-spotted pervert a clear look at your perfectly groomed lady-ness as you weren't wearing any knickers. Which she wasn't.

The look on his face really was a picture. She thought he was going to have a heart attack.

She bent forward and picked up her … *cola* … and crossed the bar to Damian and … she slid in on Damian's shoulder and looked down the blonde woman. He'd done well, but didn't he always? "This is Amelia," he said.

The woman ran her eyes over Amelia's body, assessing her. "Nix," she replied.

Stupid name.

"So where are we heading?"

Obviously Amelia had passed whatever the test was.

C H A P T E R 2

Amelia watched Damian and *Nix*—Urg—pretty much fucking in the rear view mirror of the car. They had poured in the back while Amelia had the dubious pleasure of driving the three of them back to the house.

As always, they had gone hunting in the city. It was far easier to pick up prey there—especially desperate wannabe men—and then bring them to the house. The house was in its own land just outside one of the villages about fifteen or so miles from the city centre. It was secluded, romantic, quiet, all the things that Nix would be expecting for such a deviant dalliance. Not that the ménage à trois was considered particularly outlandish these days. Christ, there were TV shows about orgies going on in areas similar to that which they lived in. Amelia wouldn't have been surprised if half the farmers from the surrounding few miles weren't fucking each other's wives every Friday night.

Anyway.

She glanced in the mirror at the two of them. Tonsil hockey. Damian had his hands up and under Nix's clothes. She seemed to be enjoying it. At this stage, that was all that mattered. Amelia turned off the main road toward to the village. The streetlights stopped suddenly and the car was enveloped in gloom. Amelia flipped on the full beams and ignored the moans that were emanating from Nix.

Fuck sake.

The road was narrow to the village, with high boundaries on the sides, meaning that she had to pay more attention to driving. It was unusual—but not unheard of—to meet a tractor coming the other way in the middle of the night and the last thing they needed right now was to wrap the car around the blades of a combine harvester.

Nix's moans got deeper.

He was fingering her, wasn't he? Jesus. The car rounded the last corner before the turn off to the house and Amelia indicated off, steering the car onto a dirt driveway. She pulled through the heavy wooden gate that they'd left open earlier and stopped the car. She looked at Damian in the mirror. He was all up in Nix's face. "It's all right," she said. "I'll do it." Damian didn't even flinch, his entire self, taken up pleasuring this woman. Amelia

opened the car and got out, rounded it, and drew the gate shut. She wrapped the chain around the pole and padlocked it.

Getting back in the car, she made the drive down to the house. It was a good distance from the road—maybe a third of a mile—and you could see nothing. The lights from the car illuminated the driveway, but the house was invisible until you were on it. You'd never know it was there from the road. Even when the lights were on there was little to no visibility because of the surrounding trees, the distance. It was a perfect little love nest.

Amelia stopped the car at the house, and flipped the external floodlights on with the remote they kept on the dash. The house and its outbuildings lit like a medieval castle at night, you know… for tourists.

For the first time, Nix parted from Damian for longer than she needed to get air, and she stared out the window. "Wow," she said. It seemed half-hearted. It was like she was impressed by the house, but would lavish some more attention on it when she'd finished doing what she was doing. *Who* she was doing.

Amelia opened the car door and got out, opening the back door of the car on Nix's side like a fucking chauffeur. Nix swung her legs out and stood, almost ladylike. Almost. Damian slid over the car seat and got out the same side. The leather was probably slippery by now. Amelia smiled to herself.

Damian pulled himself up. He wasn't shit-faced, far from it, but he had put back a fair bit. He put his arm around Amelia's waist and kissed her on the neck, while Nix looked first at the house, and then at the two of them. She walked slowly to Amelia, keeping her eyes firmly focussed in hers. Finally. She walked straight to her and kissed her. Amelia could feel hands on her. Four of them. Damian had his, one on her arse, and one cupping her between the legs, on top of her skirt. Nix had both of hers on the front of her, gently caressing her breasts.

The thought that Nix was only in this for Damian and his smooth talk, his charm, melted away. Last time they had gotten to this stage, it became clear that the woman—Jessica, perhaps?—wasn't into the whole threesome thing, and probably wasn't even bi. *Which is why it would be so much easier with two women picking up a man*. Anyhow, Jessica—or was it Jasmine?—had metaphorically kicked Amelia away, paying her enough

attention so as not to cause a ruck, but not enough that Amelia was *getting enough*. Or *any*. There was to be no satisfaction for her that night.

At least, not until Damian had satisfied her. Over the prone body of the girl. She was a red head, as Amelia remembered. But only the curtains. The carpet no so much. Very disappointing.

She kissed Nix back and the three of them parted. Damian fumbled in his pockets for the keys to the house and wandered—weaved—over to the front door, unlocking it. Amelia took Nix by the hand and led her over. Damian was in and swearing lightly as he pushed the alarm code in for the second time.

"Switch the light on," Amelia called through the door.

The hallway illuminated, and Amelia gestured for Nix to enter, the beeping of the alarm stopping.

Damian reappeared. Cheesy grin. "Got it," he said. His playful boyishness was part of the charm. He came across like a spoiled rich kid who was used to getting everything he wanted, and he oozed money and sex. That was how he'd hooked Amelia in the first place.

So long ago.

He wasn't like that all the time though. He was a hunter now, and this was how he got his prey … his anglerfish light to her worm. It wasn't a great sounding analogy, but worked surprisingly well, especially when you knew what an anglerfish looked like. Normally he was cool. Mostly normal, even. He was always sexy, he couldn't help that, but it came with the territory, she supposed.

The two of them oozed sex.

C H A P T E R 3

Nix sat on the sofa sipping the Tequila Sunrise that Damian had made for her. Amelia was sitting on the other sofa opposite her, legs together. It still hadn't reached midnight, and there was plenty of time. Nix had just asked what else they had on the property, as Damian returned to the room with Amelia's vodka tonic. He placed it down and slid onto the sofa next to Nix. "There's a few acres of land," he said. "We've got a sauna and pool out the back. There are some barns—stables and such—out there too, but we're thinking of having those converted."

Nix watched Amelia over the lip of her glass as Damian spoke. "Have you lived here long?"

"The property has been in the family for generations." Damian leaned forward and took the glass from Nix, placing it on the coffee table in front of her. He whispered something in her ear, and whatever it was, it made her smile. She stood, crossing the room to Amelia and sitting down next to her.

"Damian says that you're a little pouty because he got all the action in the car." She snuggled in a little closer to Amelia. "Is that right?"

Amelia smiled as she knocked her drink back, downing it in one. The spirit warmed her throat after so much iced fucking pop. She slid her glass onto the table, and regaled Damian with a small, sly, smile. "At little," she replied. "I never get to go first." She turned back to face Nix and stuck her bottom lip out playfully. Nix brought her lips to Amelia's, close, but not touching, her hand resting on Amelia's skin just below the hem of her skirt. She slid her hand up her leg, warm on Amelia's cool skin from the night air. Amelia let her. She was smooth on her flesh, unlike Damian. Foppish as he was, his skin was still rougher than a woman's. Nix didn't hesitate, either. Amelia clearly wasn't her first. On more than one occasion Damian had captured the desires of a bi-virgin, and it had showed in their performance. They always knew what they wanted, but they didn't really know how to touch another woman. They tried, but it was sloppy. Nervous.

Nix reached her pussy, and slid her fingers expertly across Amelia. She really had done this before.

—

Amelia lay on the rug in front of the open fire, the heat from the flames lapping at her body. She had her fingers entwined in her own hair, her legs spread as far as Nix could push them. Nix was relishing her clitoris with her tongue. She made a slurping sound and then giggled. The two of them had ensured that she'd had enough to drink to be … pliable. Her arse was up in the air and Damian was kneeling behind her, fucking her. They'd done it like this a thousand times. Damian had perfected the rhythm, letting Nix work Amelia, while he worked her. So practiced was he, that he took *forever* to finish these days. One of the reasons that Nix had to be pissed. Once too often one of the girls had gotten bored—or gotten off one too many times—and wanted to stop. That had made Damian angry. He wanted to finish. It was all part of it.

The burn in Amelia rose again. She was rolling towards orgasm for the … she had forgotten how many times. Nix *was* good. Amelia let out a gently hum, as she was likely to, and then a little squeal, closing her legs a little, enough to push Nix away from her and stop her from tormenting her as she swelled in the heat of the aftermath.

Damian clearly enjoyed the sight, and Amelia watched him screw his face up as he began to cum. He was making a meal of it, as he did after spending so long getting to this point. Nix pushed her arse back to meet him as he started to pound harder now she was away from Amelia, and the room filled with the sound of their damp, sweaty skin slapping together.

Amelia slid back on the rug, up onto her elbows and watched as Damian finished, grunting in satisfaction. He dropped back onto his knees and gave Nix a slap on the arse. She rolled over, onto her back and rolled her hands over her naked breasts. "Eat me," she whispered to Damian. He just grinned back at her like it was a joke. "Hey," she said. "I didn't cum."

Damian looked at Amelia. "She wants to be eaten," he said.

"She does."

Nix looked around at the two of them. "Hey, I don't care who?"

Amelia slid up onto her knees and crawled down Nix's body, sliding her breasts over Nix's face, onto hers, and then down until she had her face in above her pubes. She slid her head down and started to feel around with her tongue, rolling across her clit, gently teasing her. She could hear Nix start to huff quickly. Amelia had pleasured plenty of people with her mouth,

men and women, and after the hour they'd just had, she knew that Nix would already be ready for it.

It wouldn't take long.

C H A P T E R 4

Amelia returned to the bedroom. The three of them had spent the night in the master bedroom, the bed the biggest you could buy. Nix was still asleep, the evening's entertainment had worn her down, along with the sheer quantity of alcohol she had drunk. Amelia was wearing a sheer gown, similar to a kimono, that she let flap open and loose. She brought Nix a coffee and set it on the side table.

"Wakey, wakey," she said. She gently nudged Nix, letting her naked body be the first thing she saw as she pulled her eyes open. Nix smiled at her, and shuffled up the bed, into the pillows. She too was naked. She looked at the coffee and then briefly admired Amelia.

"Thanks," she said. She took the drink and brought it to her lips before blowing gently on it.

"Get yourself up when you're ready. Damian is in the kitchen. We'll show you around. If you have time." She turned away, crossing the room back to the door and letting herself out. She closed it behind her. It was better for the girl to have some privacy while she relaxed. She would ponder things. It was understandable. She would drink her coffee without thinking about it.

Also understandable.

Amelia went back into the kitchen, wrapping the gown around her and tying it shut. Damian was sitting at the breakfast bar reading a magazine. He had a penchant for stupid *man* magazines. Super butch crap. *Rifles Weekly*. *My Car is Bigger than Yours*. That sort of thing. It made her wonder if he was latently batting for the other team, what with his insistence that there should be no other men in the threesome. Not that she would dare mention that particular thought, or the reasoning behind it.

"Is she up?" he asked.

"Yeah. Drinking it now. Shouldn't be long." Amelia rounded the bar and went to the cooker. She turned the gas on in the oven. Opened the fridge. There was stuff in the fridge. *Fridge stuff*. But she didn't want any of it. She wanted something fresh. Everything in there was vacuum sealed. They bought a machine that did that about five years ago. Vac sealed everything at first. Now it was just the meats that they wanted to keep fresh

for a few days longer. Smoked stuff, mostly. She stood up and slammed the door.

Damian looked up from his magazine. “Calm down.”

“What you reading about?” Amelia turned and poured herself a coffee out of the percolator.

“The horse power in the latest Lambo.”

“Very interesting.” She looked at the clock on the wall above the door. “Shall we give it another ten minutes?”

Damian shrugged. It was all the answer she was going to get. She took a swig of the black, sugarless coffee and went to change.

—

Amelia opened the door of the bedroom slowly. Quietly. She stuck her head around it to look in the room. Nix was lying on the bed. She was slumped. Motionless. *Good*. Amelia pushed the door open and went in. “Ready,” she called. She heard Damian slide the stool back on the tile floor in the kitchen as she walked over to the bed.

Nix was still breathing. *Excellent*. She could see her breasts rising and falling slowly as she approached. She stood over her. Nix’s eyes were heavy, but not fully closed. She was awake, aware. “It was the coffee,” Amelia said. “Muscle relaxant … of a sort.” She smiled and picked up the mug from the bedside table jiggling it in her line of sight. “Super fucking strong one too.” She put the mug down. “You know, the first time we used it, it killed the bitch. Straight out, no messing. Probably gave her a dose big enough to kill a fucking horse.” She took Nix’s legs and dragged her down the bed so that she was laying flat. “It’s taken us a lot of time to get it right. And it’s a damned sight easier these days what with us being able to import it directly from Arabia.” She took Nix’s hands and arms and brought them down by her side. “It’s more of an anaesthetic, to be honest.”

That was when Damian walked in the room and over to the bed. “How’s she doing?” He hunched over her and looked into her eyes, but the way his eyes drifted over her body wasn’t lost on Amelia.

“She’s fine. Awake.”

“Good.” He reached down and tickled her feet. Nothing. She was dead in every way physically. She could feel him tickle her. She was being

tickled. But she couldn't move. It was like those stories you hear about people being put under for an operation but being awake during the whole thing. Creepy, really. And certainly not as bad as what was about to happen to Nix.

"What is her real name, anyway?" Amelia asked, absently.

Damian picked up her coat from beside the bed and started going through her pockets. He found her purse and pulled it out. "Driver's license says …" He looked at it, then her, back to it. "Ethel."

"*No*." Amelia snatched the photo ID card from him and looked at it. "Shit. No wonder she made up a name. And look at that picture. You know, based on that, I wouldn't have. And what kind of made up name is Nix, anyway?"

"Yes," he said. "But you didn't base your decision on that did you?" He leaned over her again and started to push his hands into her sides. "You didn't in fact, base it on anything. You did what I told you to." He glanced up at her and smiled, before turning his attention back to Nix. Ethel. Whatever.

Amelia pulled the plastic sheet from under the bed and thrust it at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Damian took it but didn't answer the question. He unfurled the tarp and laid it on the bed next to her. Then the two of them rolled Nix over onto it. They picked her up and carried her from the bedroom like she was on a shit, broken stretcher. Through the house. To the back door.

Damian rested her down on the floor. Amelia had taken the foot end. It was lighter. He was breathing hard, but not worn out. He was in too good of a shape for that. He opened the door and the two of them carried Nix, still naked, out to the shed. Neither of them worried about being seen.

They'd done this a thousand times.

C H A P T E R 5

Damian had hooked Nix to the heart monitor. The machine sat in the corner of the room to the side her. The shed was a single room, breeze block built, painted white. It was designed to be as sterile as it needed to be. Open floor, concrete, drainage in the centre of it like a wet room. An operating table in the middle. The monitor started beeping. Her body was calm. It wouldn't matter what they did to her, either. The body wouldn't care.

Hell, they only did it this way to keep the meat as fresh as possible.

Damian pulled Nix's eyes open and stared into her, dead-eyed. She was still in there. He smiled at her. "Sorry," he said. "This is going to hurt. A lot." He sighed. "I suppose I should explain what's going on, but, well … sucks to be you, right?" He moved down the table and slid out one of the drawers from beneath. He looked salaciously at the array of tools within. It never seemed to get old for him. This bit. This bit that Amelia was starting to find … dull. She watched him finding great enjoyment in this, all the while wishing she was doing the ironing. Anything.

Maybe it was because the chase no longer excited her?

Because he would never switch it up. Make a change.

"Shall we?" he asked. He was slipping his arms into the coveralls that hung on the wall. Amelia nodded and took hers down, stepping into the legs first. Then the arms. Then zipped. She bent and turned on the tap at her ankle level. Water started to flow from four mid pressure valves at the same height, spraying water out into the room, onto the floor. It created a wash, draining straight into the soakaway that would stop staining.

Damian took the *pro slicer* from the drawer and held it over Nix's still open eyes. Just so she could see it. He was taunting her. It was this she didn't like. She had no taste for the unnecessary, certainly not any more. Then he went down to her thigh and parted her legs. Using the knife he cut a strip of her flesh from her. It ran from just above the patella—the knee—to close to her groin, without touching it. It was a well-practised cut, like a master butcher separating ribs. Amelia wondered if that would come later. He always chose what cuts would happen. He took the rasher from her and laid it with some reverence on the table next to her. Blood let from the wound, slowly at first, and then faster, like her body was awakening to the trauma. Damian gave Amelia a glance. "Sorry," she muttered and wiped

away the oozing blood and viscous plasma that wept from Nix. Then he cut again. The two of them worked together, cutting and slicing, and dabbing and wiping, Damian cutting away enough to reach, but not breach the femoral artery, but to the bone—the femur exposed, cleaned of meat. The operating table was awash with blood and bodily fluids—Nix had pissed, it happened often. Amelia quickly scraped it all away from the body, off the edge of the table, and down to the floor, slooping into the water below, flowers of pink blooming in the running liquid, washing it into circles, down and away. Then Damian held the slicer out for Amelia to take. She looked at him, a little confused. He never asked her to do the butchery. He never *wanted* her to do it. She had always assumed that he thought her too stupid to try. "What?" she asked. Surely he wanted something else.

"You go," he replied. "You try the other side."

Amelia took the knife and lined it up with the cut above the patella on the other leg. The one that he made first. "A little higher," he said. She nodded and moved the knife up. She was shaking. "Gently," he whispered. Amelia pushed the knife into Nix's flesh. She was very aware of the heart monitor.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Surprised at how easily the knife slid in, Amelia began by cutting into the meat too deeply. Damian's rashers had only been a few mil thick, hers were double that to start with. She stopped, held her breath. She was half expecting Damian to snatch the knife away from her, scolding, but he didn't move. He just watched.

She could see he had an erection under the coverall. She wondered whether it was from her, cutting, or if it was Nix's naked bleeding.

She focussed back on the task at hand and cut along the flesh, correcting her trajectory, thinning the cut as she went. The room was silent apart from the beeping and under it, she could hear Damian breathing. He was excited. She reached the groin and slid the knife out, releasing the flesh. She held it out to him to look at. Like she was an excited child coming home from school with a picture. *Put it on the fridge*, she was

thinking. Damian nodded in acceptance, and then gestured for her to place it on the pile of flesh he had already made.

It was enough approval to make her happy.

She then moved onto the next rasher after Damian had wiped away the goo and blood that was leaching from the flesh. She understood how important it was from this angle to be able to see clearly. The second slice was better. She felt more confident in the cut. The action. The slice came off well. And the next. And the next. She was getting quicker.

As the knife rode up Nix again and again, Amelia became aware that her heart rate was getting slower.

"Last one," Damian said, his voice cutting through the hypnotic beeps of the machine.

Amelia sliced quickly up the leg, but was too quick. She yanked the knife away as a sudden gush of blood spurted from her leg. "Shit," she muttered. Before she knew it, Damian had taken the knife from her and discarded it to the drawer. He gave her a disappointed, disapproving glance, before turning his attention back to the leg.

"Well, don't just stand there," he said, applying pressure to the wound. "You've nicked the femoral." He looked at Amelia, staring back at him. "Hurry up and stitch her. You know the meat tastes odd if she's allowed to pass. She'll bleed out." Amelia pushed her way around the table to the drawers and pulled out the needle and thread. "It doesn't have to be pretty," he barked. Amelia stabbed the end of the hooked needle into the wall of the artery and threaded the silk through, drawing the two sides of it back together, the gush turning to a bleed, to a weep as she sealed it back up. "Fuck it," he muttered. Amelia didn't think she was supposed to hear it, but she had. "Back around that side," he said. He watched the heart monitor.

It was still constant. Amelia was sure that she was going to be fine.

Damian was so pissed he didn't even notice Nix's thumb twitch.

C H A P T E R 6

Amelia rubbed the dry herb mixture into Nix's open wounds while Damian cut through her left leg well below the knee. There was little meat on the bone around the fibula's. He'd already taken both of her hands above the wrist. It was all muscle and gristle. As the bone parted and his saw hacked the flesh away, he took the red hot iron and pushed it against the skin burning it shut, cauterizing it. Stopping the bleeding. Amelia looked at the heart monitor. It was regular again, although Damian had stopped talking to her, and she was back doing the fucking menial work.

Fucking spice rubs.

She looked up at Nix. Her eyes were partially open, muscles relaxed from where Damian had pushed them apart earlier. She was staring at the ceiling. Amelia wondered whether she could still feel it all, or if some sort of madness had taken her, and she was dreaming of something better, a happier time. Last night, perhaps?

"She's ready," Damian whispered.

Amelia nodded. She pulled the heart monitor pads from Nix's torso and the two of them picked her up and carried her out of the shed and back towards the house, before veering off to the side and over to the sauna. Damian kicked the door open, and the two of them put Nix on the floor in the centre of the room, cladded floor to ceiling in Scandi hardwood. All apart from a double window at the front. When they'd had it built the guys doing it wanted to know why they'd want such an invasion of privacy built into something so … private. The two of them had exchanged glances and coyly told the builders that the land was private enough. Why not enjoy nature when steaming?

The sauna had been a good idea at the time they had it built. It was something they could use when they were sexing with people. The window especially helped. The weirdness of it. The exhibition. Now? Not so much. These days it played a far more impressive role.

Amelia looked at Nix, and their eyes locked. "Shit," she said, a little jump, and a stumble backwards, into Damian's arms. "She's waking up. It's time."

"Let's go." Damian left first, holding the door for Amelia, and then closing up behind her. He locked it with the traditional lock in the centre, then a dead bolt at top and bottom. Amelia stepped back. He didn't want her help for this. Never did. She watched through the window. Nix had moved one of her hand-less arms. Only a little. She would be numb to the pain by now, she expected. Damian disappeared around the corner of the small building and she heard him open the door on the side. There was some noise, before the unmistakeable *whump* of the gas lighting sounded. It was loud enough inside the sauna that Nix moved a little more.

Then the smoke started from the corner of the small room.

Amelia watched, her gaze held in a trance-like state.

The smoke drifted in, seeping across the floor of the sauna, heavier than the air at first. That was the heat, Damian had told her once, the reason it was so heavy. Then as the room started to warm the smoke rose. It gave a light sheen to the air around it, as the grey mist filled the spaces, and once it did, became darker. Less translucent. Nix was laying on the floor, moving now. Amelia could barely see her through the smoke, but she was flopping around like a seal. Stumps on the ends of all of her extremities. She lost sight of her for a second. Then she saw movement. It could have been the smoke playing tricks on her eyes. Nix wasn't going to have a lot of movement. The room filled with dense smoke, and it pushed up against the window looking like some effect out of a b-grade science fiction horror film from thirty years ago.

Amelia stared into it. It was mesmerising.

Damian returned from the side of the building and put his arm around her silently, the two of them watching the smoker in action. So well-sealed was it, that you couldn't even smell smoke from the outside. He would have used whiskey barrel wood chips. His favourite.

From within the smoke, Nix came. She stumbled into the glass, her skin slamming against the smooth surface. Amelia blurted, *Jesus fucking Christ*. The smoker was like a furnace by this point, and Nix had managed to stand —*walk*—on broken stumps to the light, through the smoke, unable to breath. The heat would have been tearing the skin from her lungs already.

Damian slammed the flat of his hand on the glass. "Get back," he shouted, pulling his fingers away and rubbing them together. The glass was

already scorching. Nix staggered backwards, tearing the flesh from her body as it stuck to the fire-hot glass. It pulled easier away from her than the glass, leaving parts of her face, her breasts, her arm meat, stuck to the glass, as she disappeared back into the smoke. “Fuck,” he shouted. “The meat …”

The bits of it that were stuck to the glass cooked, sizzling on the hot surface, some dropping to the floor.

“It’ll dry out,” he said, weakly.

Amelia placed her hand on his arm soothingly. “It’ll be fine,” she said. “I’ll knock up a sauce and we can baste her a couple of hours before she’s finished. How’s that?”

Nix should quell their desires for a month or so, before they would need to go out and hunt again, as long as the meat survived the cooking process. It should. Most of it, at least. During that time Damian would be happy. He would be a different person. She would be all he wanted, and the two of them would be happy. Amelia knew. It was the way it always was.

But as the food ran low, he would desire more. He always did.

C H A P T E R 7

Amelia lolled naked on the bed. Her fingers twisting gently in the sweat that Damian had spilled on her chest as he pounded hard in her only moments ago. At least, she thought it was sweat. He was now lying next to her, his head nestled onto her belly, below her breasts, using her as a pillow. It must be sweat, she conceded. His hair was wet.

She didn't want to bring up the subject of hunting. Not yet. It had only been just over two weeks and she didn't want any of this to change. He was so good when he was full. Sated. But that woman—what was her name, again, Nancy?—she hadn't provided as much as she could have, or should have. They had lost some of the meat to her prancing around like a baby fucking deer in the smoker, and she was surprisingly muscular in certain areas. It made some of the meat tough, and to be honest, a very disappointing show. But she knew better than him the reserves, and it would only anger him if she let them run too low on the flesh.

"We need to hunt soon," she said quietly.

Damian didn't speak. Just a light grunt.

"I can go on my own this time." She continued. "Bring it back. For both of us." She spoke quietly like she was talking to an angry teen, or a hormonal boy, a trapped tiger. All of the above.

"Why?" he whispered.

"It'll be a break for you. A treat." She wasn't about to tell him the truth. It was so she could have some fun herself. So that she could guarantee not being the third wheel, and find someone she wanted to fuck. Someone she wanted to fuck *her*. A man? Perhaps. It didn't matter. She would know when she was there. But it would be her choice.

"I can't ask you to do that," he said.

Fucking hell. She wound her fingers into his hair and twirled it around playfully. "Just think … you can stay here, have a drink, warm, cosy, waiting for me to bring home dinner. As it were."

"You know it's dangerous."

Amelia snorted. "I think I can look after myself, picking up someone who wants to fuck me. Us."

"Picking up a woman who wants to …" he let the works drift off, and waited for her response.

He was such a prick sometimes. "Her, yes. Of course *her*." At least it would be her choice of *her* though. Give and take.

"Okay," he said, quietly. "If that's what you want."

—

Amelia dressed in the dressing room off the master bedroom. She'd managed to collect quite the collection of clothes over the years. Damian had wanted her to get rid of them all as the fashions changed but she had none of it. He'd held up her flapper dress and asked if he could take it to the charity shop. *Fuck you* she'd replied and snatched the dress out of his hand. How dare he? It wasn't like they needed the space. Money wasn't an issue. Ever. It never had been. Bollocks to him. She ran her fingers down the dresses that she'd brought over the last year. Then she crossed to the t-shirts and jeans. It really depended on what she was looking for tonight.

It's not like Damian would be able to do anything about it if she turned up at ten in the evening with a six foot bearded biker, now, was it? That said, it wouldn't really be worth the trouble either. She looked back across to the dresses. She wanted to rebel. She wanted to go out and pick up a couple of rich looking guys and bring them back here, and fuck them until morning and then have Damian smoke one, while she jointed the other. She held her head. But she was most likely going to come back home with a woman. Probably not even one she was particularly interested in, but rather one she felt *he* would like.

Sigh.

What to do?

She crossed back to the dresses. She took the red cocktail dress down from the rail and unzipped the cover, dropping it to the floor. It had a plunging neckline and tight fit. That settled it. She was going to find some posh totty.

CHAPTER 8

Amelia entered the bar at eight. She thought that would give her ample time to find someone suitable. A brief fifteen minutes on Facebook, knowing the right groups, had given her the best bar to hunt it. She'd travelled away from the city to the shitty seaside town of Birchingate. There was a bar advertising a ladies' night that had come with a wink emoji. The club was called *The Pink Pussycat*. It was *very* subtle.

She parked the car in one of the pay and display places overlooking the beach. It was a very short walk to the club entrance, which was just as well. *Fucking shoes*, she'd muttered as she tried to hurry. No matter how old she got, she never quite got used to the cutting wind of the south coast.

After she'd been let in by the bouncer, with no real trouble—probably because she was young, smoking hot, and wearing little more than a rag—she followed the corridor down and went into the bar. The place was fucking dead. *Shit*. No wonder the muscle on the door was so easy on her. She slid up onto a stool at the bar and the server came up from behind it. Their dress swayed toward fem, but they had an androgynous look. "Vodka Tonic. Double." They nodded and wandered off busying themselves. It looked to Amelia like they were making busy work, trying to look busier than the place demanded.

She swivelled on the stool and looked around the club. There was no more than ten people in there. She should have gotten there later. *No*, she thought, *I should have done what* I *wanted and gone to one of the pubs down in the city about five-thirty when the banks are turning out and found a malleable young man to fornicate with*. But Damian wouldn't have liked it. Damian would have sulked. Damian *might* have thrown a tantrum, and instead of gorging on tantric sex, she might have spent the early hours cleaning blood off the bed.

It wouldn't have been the first time.

Her glance shifted from one person to the next, quickly weighing up whether a) there was anyone here worth approaching or b) ditching the idea and hitting a pub, overdressed and trying to find a woman to fit the bill. Of course, the whole thing got harder because whoever she picked up here would have to be open to the idea of a threesome at home with some dude they'd never met. Damn it. She should have thought this through better. The

barperson delivered her drink. She dropped a ten on the bar and took the drink, sipping it. There was a woman sitting in a booth on the other side of the dance floor who caught her eye. Well, there was another, but she was fifty-fifty on whether it was a biological woman or not, and while she was happy to play to that beat, again, *Damian*.

Amelia got to her feet and *slendered* her way across the empty dance floor to the woman sitting in the booth. In all honesty, for what the outcome of the evening needed to be, if the woman wasn't open to a direct approach, Damian fucking her in the arse was probably going to be a hard sell. Amelia smiled at her as she got to the table, and opened with a simple, *may I?* The woman nodded her down. It was, according to her, *a free country*. The woman had long-ish black hair. It could have been brown, but the lights in there were made for love, not details. She was wearing a wife-beater, and jeans. It made Amelia feel like she was completely overdressed. If she'd been anyone else, she'd have been intimidated. But there was something about her. She was quite, quite beautiful.

Amelia slipped into the booth and placed her glass down on the table. So far, so good. She was, however, a little out of practice at this bit. Damian had insisted on the pick-up portion for the last hundred years or so, ever since the incident at *The Olde Jerusalem Inn* in Norfolk. Nasty night out, that one. So Amelia was used to the cola and fucking and not much else.

She realised that the woman was looking at her expectantly.

She really was attractive. Smouldering. Fuck. This wasn't helping. "I'm Amelia," she said. *That was shit*. The woman smiled and took a sip of her drink without giving anything away. So it was going to be like that? "Come here often?" *Fucking hell*.

The woman smirked. "If that's the best you've got," she said, "it's just as well you've ended up with me. I'll go easy on you."

Cheek. But Amelia couldn't take offense. There was just something …

"I'm Liz." She half stood like a gent would and stuck out her hand. Slightly taken aback, Amelia shook it.

"Amelia."

"You said." Liz grinned at her. "So what the hell are you doing in a place like this?"

Amelia tried the innocent look. “What?” She looked around like Liz might have been talking to someone else. “I come here all the time.” *Shit. She probably does. She’ll know.* “Well,” she continued. “Places like this.” *Dodged that one.*

“That’s not what I mean.” Liz slid around the booth to end sitting next to Amelia. “What are you?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Amelia reached for her drink. Time to leave. She’d been rumbled.

Liz snapped her hand forward with lightning speed and gripped Amelia’s wrist. “I asked you a question.”

Amelia was drawn to look at her. She looked her in the eyes. Deep. She had never wanted anyone else so much in her life. She would have fallen to the floor and taken her there and then. She would have clawed the skin from her own body—every fucking inch of it—if it meant that this woman, this perfect woman of whom she was drowning in the eyes of would kiss her. Once.

That was all she needed. One kiss from her. She could end right there, happy.

“Immortal ghoul,” she said. Amelia clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Thought so.” Liz let go of her wrist. “I spotted you the instant you came in.”

Amelia removed her hand from her mouth and looked this luscious beauty in the eyes. She was wary that she might blurt something further. *Where the fucking hell did that come from?* “No, obviously that was a joke.” She laughed, unconvincingly.

Liz shook her head. “Oh. I see.” She glanced around and winked at Amelia. “So, what *are* you doing in here?” She looked over to the bar and waved at them. Clearly they knew what it meant, because a moment later another drink was brought over to the table. “Hook up? Or dinner?”

Amelia smiled. “Why not both?”

“You like to eat out?”

Amelia burst out laughing. “Oh, what the fuck.” She smirked and looked off to the side. She didn’t feel embarrassed, at least hadn’t until now, not since the eighteen hundreds or such. This woman seemed to have some

sort of … way … about her. Some sort of hold. “So, you think you know me so well? Go on. What’s my game?”

“Well, *immortal ghoul*, my guess is that in this day and age it has become a lot harder to off peasants and feast on their flesh, and you have had to become more careful about your feeding habits. You’ve probably weened your feeding into some sort of cycle, where you can intermingle the flesh of your hunt with something more every day. I dunno, beans, or sushi, something. And you’re out on the hunt tonight. Probably picking up some meat to return home with. Takeout, if you will. I suspect for ease you would be looking for some desperate young buck with a horn of a size that matters. He would be very easy, I assure you, however you’ve found your way in here by mistake and are now somewhat at a loss. You had to choose. You could either bend the other way and find a feisty female, or leave and try your luck at one of the other local establishments. I can assure you, however, as I *am* from around these parts, that the nearest pub from here is a real ale place where you will find both homely men and women whose interest stops at the hops in the glass.”

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

“It is. But don’t malign what you haven’t tried. The ales in the micro-breweries around here pack quite the punch. What does surprise me though is that you are alone. The stories that I heard of late was that the ghouls were all hunting in packs now, like dogs. Safety in numbers. I would have expected someone like you to have a whore on a lead to help garner the interest of a young male.” Liz looked Amelia up and down. “Looking the way you do and with another thirsty female in tow, finding a male’s interest would be easy. Far easier than hunting alone or with a male ghoul. What man wants to hook up with a couple?”

I knew it.

“There will obviously be the exception, and you are in the right place for that sort of thing, but you really do seem to be here alone. So which was it?”

“What?” Amelia had lost track of the conversation.

“Are you turning to the darkside for the evening, or trotting off somewhere else to try your luck with the bellied beer brigade?”

“Who are you?”

"You haven't worked it out? Where have you been? Living under a rock?" She lifted the corners of her mouth subtly. "And what of your other appetites?"

Amelia raised her eyebrow.

"Some of the most rambunctious lovers in history have been ghouls. An insatiable desire for the flesh, in more ways than one, if you get my meaning."

Amelia held her hand up. "Yes. You clearly do know me so well."

"So please. Tell me, batting for the other team tonight?"

"Why? Why do you care?" Amelia looked around nervously. "You clearly have me at a disadvantage, and in my somewhat limited experience, this is probably going to go very badly for me."

"Oh, no, my dear. I don't mean you harm." She let her hand come down to rest on the back of Amelia's. "Quite the opposite, in fact." There was that little smile again. "I didn't clock you as a ghoul immediately. First I was bowled over by your beauty. Elegance. I was hoping that I could buy you a drink."

"W-what?" Amelia was now confused. First, she'd never been made before. That was new. And bad. She'd heard the stories from years ago, back where there were witchfinders, and heroes, back when the world *believed*. If you were made, you were dead. Then there was—and she may have heard this incorrectly—the notion she had that this woman who had made her, had made a pass at her, too. Again, this could have all been a misunderstanding based on Amelia's own lack of practice, and that this woman—whoever she was (but she was gorgeous)—was about to pull a silver blade from her purse and thrust it through her heart. That could have been how you killed werewolves, to be honest, but over the years the methods had all started to blur together, what with Hollywood making up whatever they felt like and the fact that no one was actually doing it anymore. It was a fog of war thing. The mists of time. Whatever.

"I want to fuck you," the woman replied, licking her lips. "Tonight."

C H A P T E R 9

Absolutely crazy. Amelia closed the car door and watched Elizabeth slowly climb the steps to the house. She wiggled, seductively, as she walked, and Amelia couldn't take her eyes from her. It was weird. In all the years that she had been with Damian—most of them besotted—she hadn't ever felt quite this way. It was like she was under some sort of control. Liz had found some switch inside her that said *love me* and had flicked it. Flicked it hard.

Amelia shivered with anticipation.

The car beeped behind her as Liz flipped the fob out to the side and pressed the button, and Amelia pushed herself away from the car and towards the house.

Leaving the club, only minutes after Amelia had heard what a transparent little ghoul she was, the two of them were in the cool night air—that cutting wind off the coast, again. Liz had taken her hand, dragging her gently over to the same car park that she had parked in, only they went to the BMW that Liz had. It was a low thing. Not much in the way of home comforts, sure, but sleek and stylish.

It reminded her of Liz.

They'd jumped in and Liz had driven hard and fast. Not too far. Only to the far side of the town, and parked in the street outside an old town house. It was fucking immaculate, and only added to the intrigue.

But sitting in the car in such proximity to Liz was intoxicating. She dripped with pheromones … something … something strong and pungent. Pungent was probably the wrong word. Anyway, if she'd been a man Amelia would have slid down the seat and happily sucked her cock. The wait on the drive—the anticipation of what was coming—was unbearable. On more than one occasion Amelia had considered pleasuring herself right there. She was sure that Liz wouldn't mind. She might even be excited by it. Granted, it wasn't very, well, nice, to yank up your dress and start doing the Ménage à moi, but that was how she made her feel.

And the drive was only about seven minutes. She might not have finished.

Liz opened the door and stepped through into the house and the lights in the hallway came on. She waved her along, like Amelia was dawdling or

something, and she hurried up the steps behind her and entered the house, closing the doors. Even away from the coast, further in town, the window chill was still harsh.

Liz turned to her and smiled. “Would you like a proper drink?”

Amelia nodded. She felt delirious. What was she doing here? The fleeting thought of Damian sitting at home crossed her mind and then she thought nothing more of it, her mind filled with Liz. She followed her through the house to the kitchen and Liz pulled a champagne bottle from the fridge. She set it on the table, got down two flutes and then opened the bottle. The cork popped loudly, and even though Amelia was expecting it, she still jumped.

Amelia rounded the edge of the table and pushed herself up against Liz. “Leave it,” she whispered. “I don’t want that. I want you.” Liz being so close to her …

Liz poured two glasses before turning to Amelia and kissing her gently on the lips. Her skin was cool. Smoother than anything Amelia had felt in her life. She was everything. Perfect. Liz stepped back from her and looked down her body. Amelia couldn’t tell if she was admiring her or judging her. Either way, she liked having the woman’s eyes on her. What was happening? This all felt so …

Liz stepped forward. She placed her hand on Amelia’s breast.

That was when all thought left her head.

“Follow me,” Liz whispered.

Powerless to resist, Amelia did, as Liz passed her by and went back into the hall. To the stairs. The two of them climbed. Amelia watching Liz the whole time. There was something in the back of her mind telling her to stop. This was stupid. She’d gone off-piste, but there seemed to be nothing she could do about it. At the top of the stairs, Liz turned. She smiled down at Amelia, lower on the stairs. “I have something to show you.” She beckoned her forward, and without word, Amelia followed.

Liz went to the first door on the right. She turned the key in the lock and opened it. Stepped through. Amelia came to the door and waited. Apprehensive. She looked through, watching Liz. The high heels she wore —which fitted well with the wife beater/jeans ensemble surprisingly well— thudded on the bare wooden floor. Frozen in silence, Amelia watched as Liz

crossed to the woman in the corner of the room. She was young. Pale of skin. Thin. She had a beauty about her, one that was exacerbated by her timid-ness.

That, and she was naked.

When Liz reached her, she ran her fingers over the girl. She couldn't have been more than a teenager. She rounded behind her. The girl was obviously captive—why else would the door be locked?—but she made no attempt to leave. She just let Liz touch her. Caress her. The girl's nipples hardened as Liz pushed up against her back and reached around tracing her areola with her long red finger nails. The girl breathed in deeply. Sharp. Like she was getting some sexual rise from the touch. But she didn't move. She didn't move to touch Liz back. Or touch herself.

Just watching her—them—Amelia was wet. She could feel it. She had no idea why, either. There was something horrifying unfolding before her very eyes and all she wanted to do was rip her clothes off and fuck Liz until dawn. "Come in." Liz's words broke Amelia from her thoughts. Without thinking, she stepped into the room. "This is Four."

"Four," Amelia repeated in a whisper.

Liz nodded. "Four will do anything I want. She does anything I want. She will do anything you want by proxy."

"I didn't realise you were into this lifestyle." Amelia didn't take her eyes from Four.

Liz nodded. "There is plenty that you haven't realised. Look at me." Amelia's eyes rose from Four to Liz, almost without conscious thought. She looked her in the eyes as she stood hidden behind the naked girl. Her arm was still wrapped around her torso, her fingers playing on the skin. She smiled and bared her teeth. Her fangs extended from her canines. She dipped her mouth down onto Four and sunk her teeth in, drinking from the girl.

The girl smiled, wanly, her face contorting slightly as she bit deeper, and then another change—one that Amelia was sure was Four orgasming. She visibly became weaker in the legs, trying to hold her herself up, beyond the grip that Liz had on her, around her, entwining her. Liz never took her eyes from Amelia. Amelia should have run. Part of her wanted to. The other

part didn't. Or at least wouldn't let her. It was so confusing to be in her head right now.

Liz pulled her mouth away from Four. The girl was panting. "Thank you," she said weakly.

"You're welcome," Liz replied. She let go of the girl and she slumped down to the floor boards, shivering, but not cold.

Amelia stepped across the room and over the girl, into Liz's arms. Everything made sense now.

Now that she knew Elizabeth was a vampire.

C H A P T E R 1 0

Four sat on the chair in the corner of the kitchen. She was paler now than before. Shivering because the blood was leaving her body faster than it could naturally replenish it. She wasn't moving, she was just sitting, staring out into the room, looking at nothing in particular.

The oven was on.

Blood pooled on the floor below her.

Amelia was sitting in the dining chair with her legs spread, her dress hitched up by her arse. Liz was holding her inner thighs, the blood from Four, sticky, covering her fingers, being painted onto Amelia's skin like lube. Her tongue flicked against the heat bursting from Amelia as her eyes rolled, another orgasm running though her body. The room smelt like roast dinner mixed with the iron burn of the blood on the floor, the blood on Amelia, the blood Liz was lapping onto her.

"Please," she whimpered. "No more."

Liz drew back slightly and looked up at her. Her fangs still protruded, but Amelia hadn't felt them once. "I haven't finished yet," she said.

"You haven't started yet," Amelia blurted. "It must be your turn by now."

Liz smirked and stood. Apart from the two of them kissing briefly, then cutting off Four's leg at the knee—putting it in to roast—and then Liz getting excited and eating Amelia to climax—*three times*—they hadn't done anything. "Come on then, dinner will be another hour." She took Amelia's arm and helped her to stand. Amelia was weak. She felt euphoric. Yet she didn't want to stop. Not ever. It was the weirdest sensation.

Amelia glanced at Four. "What about her? We've broken your …" She thought for a second. "… buffet?"

Liz followed her stare. "Oh, don't worry. I've got another one." She pulled her close and kissed her again, her fingers finding their way to Amelia, between her legs, and attempting re-entry.

Amelia pulled away. "No. I need a minute." Liz dropped her head to the side and grinned. She took her hand and led her out to the living room, where she dropped onto the sofa. She unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down, over her hips and off. She never once took her eyes from Amelia.

Amelia got to her knees, straddling Liz. She bent down and teased her lips over Liz's cold cheek. Over her lips. She brushed her tongue over Liz's bottom lip, as her fingers ran down the curves of her body, gently caressing her over the vest she still wore. They danced down her body to the edge of her knickers and slipped below, finding a full, haired, mound. "Old fashioned," she whispered.

"No choice," she replied, "not after the change."

Amelia smiled and slid her legs from her, down to the floor and gently fingered Liz, sliding her tips in and around her skin. The sensation was strange to the touch. Liz was wet, she started to breath heavier as she rose in pleasure, yet her skin was cold to feel, like she was fingering a corpse. "Push them in me," she urged. Amelia didn't hesitate. She slid her fingers into Liz, who released a sigh, then a grunt as Amelia pulled them back, pushed forward, slowly at first and then harder, curling her fingers upwards inside her, rubbing her wall.

Liz let out a sound like a pissed off baby goat as she rolled toward orgasm, reaching down and sliding her fingers over her clit, moaning, *oh*, and, *yes*, over and over. And Amelia wanted nothing more than to give it to her. She would have died to pleasure Liz, and be pleasured by her.

As Liz grunted, she put her bare foot up onto Amelia's chest and pushed her slightly away, stopping her. She slid her fingers into her mouth, tasting her own juices, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Oh my," she said. "I might keep you." She spun her legs up and over Amelia and slid off the sofa, leaving Amelia on her knees. "You wait there," she whispered before leaving the room.

Amelia waited. There on the floor. She didn't feel the need to move. An inch. Something wasn't quite right. She heard Liz on the stairs. She was going up. The further she got up the stairs, the more Amelia felt herself return to normal. *What was she doing?* "What the fuck," she whispered. She got to her feet. She felt light headed. There was a noise overhead from the floor above.

She looked down at herself. *What would Damian think*? Then her gaze returned to the ceiling. The thoughts she was having about Liz seemed to be fading almost as quickly as they arrived. But still they lurked there. In the back of her mind, like she had been infected. Liz was moving again, upstairs. The heat in Amelia started to rise suddenly.

It was as the two of them got closer together.

Amelia felt herself drawn to her again. She got back to her knees and waited. Liz came back down the stairs and saw her. “You don’t need to do that,” she said. “I can’t help it. You must have heard the stories? Of the vampire glamour? The ability that we have to make anyone fall in love with us? It’s a pain in the arse, really. I can’t hook up with anyone without them falling head over heals with me. Smitten. I didn’t think it would work on a ghoul.”

Amelia got to her feet, unsure. “So how would you know if feelings are ever real?” she asked, quietly.

“My cross to bear,” she said, waving for Amelia to sit on the sofa.

She did as she was instructed, without thought, realising her dress was still hooked up from the kitchen, and she was exposed from the waist down. She had no desire or inclination to pull it back down. Liz slumped down next to her on the sofa and Amelia reached across her, to caress, touch.

“I don’t want. Not now.” Liz looked away.

Amelia was hurt. She could admit it. But she didn’t know how to fix it. “What can I do to make it better?” she asked.

Liz shook her head. “Well, let’s be honest. The only way that I can be sure is if I get away from you and you come back. But that’s never worked before.”

Amelia thought about Four. There was probably a Three, Two, and a One, at some point, too. They obviously hadn’t been given this option. *Let me go and see if I come back*. She wasn’t a puppy. She let out a small smirk and then coughed to cover it. And break the silence. But that did mean that Liz must feel differently about Amelia. That was a thought. Maybe she was all right. Maybe.

That also meant that One through Four were only being used as food. Possible sex things. She glanced at Liz. Most likely sex things.

She pondered for a second. She felt that although all of it had been under some mind control malarkey, Liz probably had treated her better over the last few hours than Damian had in the last … she thought for a second … couple of decades. When was the last time he’d cut off someone’s foot for her? And not just someone—someone who was going to die without providing him anything else? Maybe some of these feelings weren’t all her.

She was frowning.

Liz looked at her and smiled. “Try not to think about it,” she said. “You can go if you want.”

Amelia stood, and pulled her dress down to cover herself. “Hm,” she said in a half grunt. She glanced down to Liz before heading to the front door. The feelings subsided as she got further from her, as she expected, and she didn’t look back. She could sense the difference, now, telling one feeling from the other. She opened the front door and stepped out into the cold night air.

Liz followed her to the hallway. “I’ll give you a lift back to your car,” she said.

Amelia put her finger up to stop her. “I think the … roast will be done.” Liz nodded and turned back to the kitchen. Amelia hurried down the steps to the pavement and along, getting away from the house.

A few moments later, Liz appeared at the door. She looked sad. She glanced down the road, and saw Amelia standing there, half a road down. She had her heels in her hand, shivering in the cold night air. Amelia gave her a quick wave, and then ran back down the road towards her. Liz waited, watching, as Amelia rounded the wrought iron fence fronting the house, and dashed up the steps, flinging her arms around Liz.

Kissing her deeply.

C H A P T E R 1 1

The two of them embraced on the bed, Liz's cold skin, hard on Amelia. Amelia rolled her tongue around Liz's areola making her writhe in pleasure. She slid her fingers over her hairy mound, slinking them to her moist flesh, turning her moans to grunts. Amelia continued. Satisfying Liz over and over. She wondered why it was so easy to pleasure a woman—a monster—with no heartbeat, no air in her lungs, but that was her least concern. She enjoyed pleasing her, and not because the vampire had a hold of her, but because she wanted to.

Her lust for Damian was depleting. That was truly how she knew that she really wanted Liz. She didn't want him anymore.

—

Amelia opened her eyes, the sun streaming in the window. She rolled over on the bedsheets to find Liz gone. Bleary, she looked around the room. Empty. She sat, naked, dropping the sheets from around her body and getting to her feet. The muscles in the thighs had a warming ache to them. She ran her tongue around her teeth. Her mouth felt like an old carpet. The thought brought a smile to her face. As she looked around the room for her clothes—she remembered discarding her dress somewhere—the door opened. She turned to face it, expecting Liz, but it was another woman. Surprised, she covered herself as best she could with her arms, although the best she could was not very well. The woman just sort of looked through her. She was wearing a short dress, oddly, looking like she was ready to go out for the evening.

"Madam left me for you," she said. "I am Five. She said you could take me home and use me. She said I was an alibi." She spoke without any emotion. Robotic.

Amelia watched her, curiously. "Where is … Madam?" She didn't like saying the word. Five was clearly mindless. She wondered how many of them there were.

"Madam takes the daylight in the basement. You're clothes are laid out in the guest room. Madam said I was to drive you back to your car and then go with you."

But what about the hold that Liz had over the woman? Surely it would wear off completely before she left the street? As if Five was reading her mind, she said, "I will be no trouble. She has said to assure you."

Amelia nodded. She found that her hands had dropped from her body and she was just open. "Take me to the guest room."

Five led her from the room.

—

Amelia pulled the car up outside the house, with Damian nowhere to be seen. He was pissed. She could tell without getting out. She looked at Five. Her demeanour hadn't changed at all. Amelia had tried to start a conversation on the drive, but the young woman was near unresponsive. She just stared at the road like she was on drugs. Amelia had given up on it eventually and spent the rest of the drive wondering if whatever was causing Five to be like this was the same thing that Liz used to keep the … numbered women? … in check when she was out. And why was she going out? Clearly she had everything she could possibly need at home.

Damian opened the front door of the house. He *was* pissed. Clearly. But his demeanour changed as soon as he realised that Amelia had brought home a plaything. He'd chastise her later, after whatever was going to happen with the woman he didn't know yet had happened. Amelia looked at Five. She felt a little sorry for the woman, really. First she was pulled by a vampire, God only knows when and how. Then she becomes an unwilling sex slave to her, and—although she hadn't thought to check her neck before they were in the car—snack stop. Now she's going to have to fuck an immortal ghoul, who having had her eyes opened wasn't the nicest bloke in the world, and then get eaten by him. And probably her.

Pretty much sucked to be Five.

She waved out to Damian and opened the car door. Five just sat there and waited, so Amelia hurried around the car and opened the door, before Damian had time to get over to her and castigate her. Five stepped out as Damian reached them. "This is …" Oh, shit. Um. "F … iona."

"What a lovely name." Damian took the woman's hand and kissed it. She let him. Unsurprisingly. He shot a look to Amelia, before leading Five,

er, Fiona, away towards the house. She was led by him, zombie like. Amelia wandered along, behind, like a scolded child.

In the house, Damian asked F … iona if she wanted a drink. He could make a fantastic cocktail, he said. It was the usual set of lines, those that he would use on the prey he'd caught himself. Five shook her head. Not a word. Whatever Liz had done to her, she was almost pre-programmed to do what Amelia wanted. Not Damian. *Fuck*.

"I think you should fuck Damian," Amelia said, matter-of-factly. She just hoped it would work.

Five got to her feet and started to disrobe.

Damian looked over at Amelia and smiled. He wasn't fucking around either. He seemed super impressed with this new revelation. He didn't have time to do much else either, as Five was wearing some really quick to take off clothes, apparently. Amelia smiled back at Damian, and then looked at Five, naked, and making her way around the edge of the sofa to him.

"Whoa," he said.

She ignored him, walking straight to him and starting to remove his belt.

Amelia watched. She neither wanted to fuck Damian herself, nor join in with Five. She wanted to go back to Liz, in all honesty. Five was young. Early twenties by the look of it. Amelia couldn't see any vampire scarring on her neck, so at least that wouldn't raise suspicion. She was strong—athletic looking. Long brown hair. Severe cheek bones. Quite the classical look, to be honest.

Ruined slightly by having Damian's half-mast cock in her mouth.

Already.

Damian was staring at Amelia. Wow, he mouthed. *Urg*. Amelia looked down at her. Her bum was nice, she'd concede that much. Five stood and led Damian around to the front of the sofa, pushing him back to sit, his trousers around his ankles and his hard cock sticking out the leg hole of his pants. Five straddled him and guided his cock into her. It was, after all, what Amelia had said she should do.

Amelia raised an eyebrow.

This could get interesting after all.

“Stop,” she said. “Get off of him.” Five did as she was instructed.

“Hey,” Damian moaned.

“All good things,” she said. “Take Damian to bed. Strip him naked and tie him to the bed.” Damian looked at Five—her tits still in his face—and then over to Amelia. His smarmy disgusting smile widening. Five got off him and took his hand pulling him hard to get him from the sofa.

“Up the stairs,” Amelia said. “Last door on the right.”

C H A P T E R 1 2

After quickly visiting the kitchen, Amelia got to the bedroom to find Five already standing over Damian, tied spread eagle to the bed. They were both naked. Damian was, of course, hard as a rock and dripping with anticipation, but Amelia could see from the look on his face that he was getting a little impatient. “Ask him what he wants,” she said to Five.

“Well?” Five replied, looking at Damian.

His apprehensive look turned back to a smile. “I want you to fuck me,” he said. He glanced over to Amelia. “What else?”

Amelia walked over to Five and revealed the rolling pin from behind her back. “Fuck him with it,” she said.

Damian’s eyes snapped to her. “What?”

“You heard,” she said, smiling.

Five took the rolling pin and weighed it in her hand before bending over Damian and starting to try and find the best way of getting it up his arsehole while he was tied town.

Amelia watched him as he started to squirm.

Writhe, motherfucker.

Five bent down, swinging the rolling pin around and trying to get it into the position needed to spacedock. She got down in between Damian’s slithering lower body, but he managed to get enough movement in his knees to crack Five on the chin, knocking her from the bed, rolling pin and all.

Amelia watched her, squinting.

“What the actual fuck?” Damian ranted. He dragged hard—all his might hard—on the poorly tied ropes holding him down. Amelia watched helplessly as he literally tore himself free from the bed. She should have come up with Five before going and getting the faux dildo, and made sure there had been a proper job done on the tying. Damian pulled himself from the bed, as Five got herself up from the floor, and retrieved the pin. Both naked, it was quite the sight to see Damian drop a hammer fist onto the side of the woman’s head, knocking her back to the carpet with a sickening thud.

He looked at Amelia next. She noted, that although he had a fire of anger in his eyes that he hadn’t shown in many years, he was still erect.

Impressive, really, to be that pissed off, and still horny.

Damian strode across the room to Amelia. She expected him to read her the proverbial riot act, and she would calm him down by placating him with benign and pointless platitudes. Things like *I was only joking*, and, *I thought you'd like it, lol, joke*. But as soon as he was within reaching distance, he backhanded Amelia across the cheek. It was hard. Hard enough to knock Amelia to the side, causing her to reach out and steady herself on the dresser. "Fucking hell," she screamed.

"You think you're funny, do you?" he bellowed at her. She pushed herself away from the dresser, back to standing, and this time he punched. He struck her in the abdomen. Hard enough to bend her over, the burn of puke rising in her guts. She could taste it in her mouth. She flipped down and faced the floor, grunting. She tried to drag air in, but it felt like her stomach was gripped in a clamp. "Piss taking cunt." Damian put his hands around her neck and dragged her back to standing. "I thought I knocked the fight out of you a century ago." His head rose as he prepared, and Damian slammed his forehead down onto Amelia, head-butting her across the bridge of her nose.

A sudden blackness, followed by sparkling twinkles of white covered her vision, as pain body-slammed her brain. She blinked, blinded for a second, stepping backwards, the look of a surprised rabbit on her face. All she could hear was a thunder storm in her head. Sickness rose again from her stomach. Harder, faster. This time she wasn't going to hold it back. She felt her mouth open, and she could feel the vomit flowing freely from her, onto her chin, dropping down onto her chest, the dress. But she still couldn't hear anything. She couldn't see.

She was struggling to breathe.

Her nose was blocked, her throat full of bile. She gasped, and that caused coughing. She dropped to her knees. *This is it*, she thought. The end. *I can't breathe*. More vomit came, as she rolled over onto her side, puke drooling out of her mouth, onto the floor.

Finally the air came back, slowly. She could find some breath, pulling it past the partly digested gruel that lay shallow in her airways. She could feel herself blinking, although, all she could see was the flashing lights. It was like her brain synapsis were firing in front of her, and they were beautiful. As she lay there, she thought she might be smiling.

As the lights started to fade, she could see the blood that had gushed from her nose. It was pooled, darkening and sticky beneath her. She could see the bridge of her nose. Broken, most likely, but if not, horribly disfigured, at least for now. She could see Damian.

He'd pulled Five up from the floor. She hadn't regained consciousness, but Amelia was sure he hadn't hit her hard enough to kill her. He'd draped her over the bed on her front. She could see him fucking her. He was doing her from behind. Might have been fucking her arse. It wouldn't have surprised her. She shouldn't have let this go this way.

She looked at him banging hard into her. He didn't look like he was fucking her for pleasure. He was either doing it because he thought she owed him, or he was doing it to get rid of his hard-on. Either way, she suspected she was next.

Stupid.

CHAPTER 13

The black was interrupted by a white light. Amelia hadn't realised that she was opening her eyes, but in some semi-state of consciousness, had. She was staring across the floor. She hadn't been moved. She didn't know how long she'd been there.

It took a moment to focus.

Five wasn't on the bed. Damian didn't appear to be in the room, not that she could properly tell without moving. She tried lifting her head, but it felt like there was too much blood sitting in one side of it. The motherfucker of all hangovers. She reached up and cradled the side of her head. There was a lump, probably from where she had landed. *Fuck*. She tried to snort the dried blood up into her nose, swallow it back, but it was solid. Jesus. Amelia rolled over onto her back. She stared at the ceiling. Blotches danced in her eyes. Dead cells free to move. She listened. At least that bit seemed to work.

Damian.

She could hear him moving about. He might have been in the room. Maybe not. Hard to tell. Looking around, there he was. He was dressed now. She looked around the bedroom. No Five. "You're awake," he said. He stopped whatever he was doing and looked down at her. "Go and wash," he continued. "You're filthy."

He turned and left the room, leaving Amelia to try and get up by herself. She managed to pull her feet around, get them under her. She got onto her knees, and pulled herself to standing by the dresser. Her head swam.

She staggered across towards the en-suite, plonking her feet down in front of her like a baby deer. In the bathroom she flipped the light on and looked in the mirror. Her face was swollen, her eyes puffed out. Dark bruising lay across her mutated nose. It had a split where the bone was, but most of the blood had come from up it. That was the blockage, she thought. Luckily, it looked like she might have gotten away without black eyes. She turned the shower on. She didn't wanted to wash. She didn't want to do what he told her to, but she didn't want the consequences of defiance either. She slipped out of the dress she still wore from last night and kicked her shoes across the floor. The dress was ruined. Amelia pushed the door of the

bathroom to closed, without latching it. Latching it would piss him off further, but she didn't want there to be an invitation for him to come in and join her either. Hopefully he was still busy with whatever he was doing with Five.

She wished she'd come back empty handed. Then at least this would all just be on her.

Amelia stepped into the shower. The warm water was relaxing, soothing, on some parts of her. On others it stung mercilessly. She washed between her legs, the memory of Liz there so fresh and raw, yet so far away now. So long past. She washed the woman's smell from her. Made sure that she wasn't going to make him angrier.

Amelia got out of the shower and dried off. She opened the door to the bedroom hoping that Damian wasn't there.

He was sitting on the corner of the bed. It was like he was waiting for her. Like he wanted to see how she was going to act. How she was going to be dressed. Test her.

She strode, naked, across the room towards the walk in. "Hey," he said quietly. It was like none of this had happened and he had just accidently caught her getting out of the shower. Amelia stopped. She looked at him slowly, trying to judge what he wanted, like it wasn't obvious. He smiled at her as their eyes met and he gestured with his head that she should go to him.

She felt sick. Not sick like he had just punched her in the stomach. Not sick like she'd just swallowed her own cold blood because he'd broken her nose. Sick. Vile hate filled sickness. She turned on her heals and walked over to him. He reached up and cupped her breasts in his hands and massaged them. He was trying to be normal. It was what he expected her to be too. She leaned forward, bringing them to his mouth and he suckled on them, his tongue running excitedly around her nipples. She made the noises that he would want her to make. She made happy noises. Noises of sexual satisfaction while he violated her. She felt his hand slide in between her legs. She didn't feel anything. Not from his touch. No explosion. Not like when Liz had.

Liz had awakened her.

But still she made the happy sounds. Then Damian leaned back. First on his arms. She could see he was hard beneath his trousers. That was what he wanted. He wanted her to please him. Then in his mind it would be all right. Amelia reached down and unhooked his trousers, and tugged the zip down. He let out this satisfied sound. She pulled them off his hips and he wriggled to let them be free, then she slid his cock out the side of his pants. She made sure to take a deep breath. Like she was surprised, no, in *awe*, of his size and girth.

She didn't want cock at all. Not now. Not ever. She wrapped her fingers around him and started to stroke him. *Mmm*, she purred. *Urg*. He looked at her. He was smiling, but he looked smug. He was exhibiting his dominance. She was an immortal ghoul who could do nothing to stop … this. "Put it in your mouth," he said. It wasn't a request, nor was it a whisper, a plea. He was in control and he knew it.

Amelia leaned over him and started to touch the tip of his cock with her tongue, rolling it around the head. The less time this … thing … was in her mouth the better. She cupped his balls. At least she knew how best to please him. Make him cum quicker. She slid his head into her mouth and ran the tips of her fingers around his shaft. She couldn't breathe through her nose. She had to come up for air quickly. She slid off, breathed quickly, and then back on, down further. He was less into blowjobs than he let on. Down. Up, Quick breath. Down. Work the balls. Work the shaft. He covered his eyes with his arms, and was grunting within a minute.

The violence had turned him on. And what he'd done to Five, whether he enjoyed it or not. He was going to finish quickly. Good. Amelia was struggling to keep it up. She felt him flex. He was grunting.

He came hard in her mouth and she swallowed it quickly, beginning to choke, without breath. She felt like it would have come out of her nose if it could. She pulled away and swiped the drools of spunk from her mouth, and he lay there, unmoving, his arm still covering his eyes. He was grinning like a fucking clown. "You're great," he said. He didn't even sound like he meant it.

Amelia stepped away from him and continued over to get dressed. She could hear him sitting up and refastening his trousers. "What would you like me to wear?" she asked. He'd like that.

Anything to avoid another beating.

“Dress down,” he said. “We’re going outside.”

CHAPTER 14

Amelia followed Damian out of the house into the garden and across to the tool shed. She didn't like it. But she stayed a subservient distance behind him to ensure some sort of peace was held. Damian pushed the door open and held it for her. She stepped by him. Part of her was expecting him to take her right then. To force her into the room and onto the table.

So that he could kill her.

It would be just like him. To treat her like a lover, and then turn on her. But he didn't. She stepped into the room and saw Five. She was strapped to the table. Both her arms and her feet were held at the corners of the table. She was unable to move. Naked. She was wild eyed and afraid.

She seemed to settle slightly as Amelia came in, like there was some sort of recognition there. But she still struggled. Damian hadn't made the mistake that she had when she had tied him to the bed, and Five was going nowhere, not unless someone freed her. Amelia wanted to help, she did. But it was Five, or her. There was only one way for her to get out of this, and it wasn't to help Five.

Plus, she needed to eat too. There was that to remember.

"You've not put her under yet," she said.

"No. I don't intend to."

She turned back to Damian. "You want me to?" He stuck his bottom lip out and pouted. He shook his head. No. He didn't. Fuck. "So what?" she asked.

"Who is she?"

"Fiona?" She turned and looked at the woman. Little more than a girl. "Just someone I hooked up with. What you wanted, right?"

"You never came home."

"I did. Just later than you expected—"

"It was morning."

Amelia sighed. "I went back to her place," she lied. "She wasn't comfortable meeting you before she knew me." Her mind raced as she tried to construct lies without contradicting herself, trying to remember everything she'd said to him this morning.

Damian nodded. “So you don’t know her then? You don’t have any relationship with her that I should know about?” He was probing. He was obviously trying to work out why this woman was so ready to do what Amelia said and not him. Hell. She didn’t even know why that was.

Damn it. She wished Liz was here.

“Then hurt her.” Amelia looked at Damian and he motioned to the tool drawer on the side of the table. “I want you to cut her open and make her bleed.” He paused and waited for a second, before finishing. “I want you to do as *I* tell you.”

Amelia nodded and opened the first drawer revealing the tools that Damian used on the girls. They were all there. Top drawer was the blades. Second the saws. Then Pliers. Hammers. She looked to Damian for instruction. He was smiling, taking great glee in her not having any say, and that she clearly wasn’t enjoying any of this.

Even though she’d helped do exactly this a thousand times.

“The smallest knife. The sharpest. I want you to hold her fingers out flat and push the knife up behind her nails.”

Amelia picked up the knife and the woman started screaming. She wasn’t anywhere near her. Yet. “Can I sedate her?”

Damian shook his head and then gestured for her to *get on with it*.

Amelia shook her head at the woman. It was some sort of half-arsed apology, but all the woman was doing was screaming. She had started crying now, too. Amelia moved to the top of the table and took Five’s hand in her own, prising her fingers open and pushing her hand down flat on the table. She was cold from laying on this slab in the shed. Shaking. Amelia held her weight on Five’s hand to keep her palm flat and her fingers down, splayed out. She held the knife in her left hand and brought the tip to where the inside of the nail met the flesh. The knife was sharp. She’d used it many times. It was going to be easy. She applied pressure to the hilt of the knife and the tip of the blade slipped in behind Five’s nail. There was no blood at first, and Five didn’t react. Then she felt the pain bloom in her finger, travelling into her hand and her screaming became legendary. Blood blossomed under the nail turning it black and Five squirmed hard. Amelia couldn’t hold her hand flat and she managed to free herself enough to move

her fingers causing the knife to hack the nail from her finger. She cried harder. Sobbing, pleading for her to stop.

She kept asking *Who are you? What are you doing?* and Amelia didn't know if it was just the pleas of a frightened woman, or that whatever Liz had done to her had worn off and she had no idea where she was or why these two people had her tied to a table and had started to obliterate her body.

Damian was nodding salaciously.

Amelia looked at him, waiting for the next instruction. "Do the next one," he said. Amelia turned back to Five and did the same to the next finger. This time she pushed the knife in quicker and flicked the nail away. Lessen the pain, probably. *This was so much easier when they were unresponsive*. "Do them all." She could see that one coming. Amelia turned back and mouthed *sorry* to Five, who was scream-sobbing.

After she'd removed all ten of her finger nails, and then the ten toe nails that Damian had instructed her to do next, she turned back to him. "Now what?" Damian looked around her to Five who had blacked out from the pain. "Scalp her."

"What?" Why on God's good earth would he want her to do that?

"I want to see her with no hair." He shrugged. "What? I'm going to eat her anyway."

He did have a point on that last one, yes. Amelia dropped the knife back into the drawer and pulled out a larger one. "This one?" she asked, waving it at him. She'd never done it before, and guessed that he hadn't either. He shrugged a half nod. Amelia turned back to Five. This was probably going to kill her, which was just as well, given what else might happen to her, and a blessing that she was going to be unconscious for it. She pulled the woman's hair up, tight across her forehead and lay it flat.

"Do it carefully," he interrupted. "In one piece."

Fucking nutcase. She worked on getting Five's hair into the right position before she started to carve. With Damian's behaviour, she was glad that she had already decided to finish it with him. This shit was beyond their base desire to kill to eat. Come to think of it, Damian's recent—over the last few decades—penchant for keeping them alive while being carved up was probably a warning sign. *No shit*, she thought to herself. Amelia pulled the

hair tight and cut across the flesh a small distance from her hair line. She pulled the hair harder, like she was skinning a raw fish, flicking the knife at where the flesh met the bone, peeling her hair back. Amelia worked her way around until Five's hair was only attached from the whorl and back. She glanced from the wound to Damian. "I can't do the rest of it without turning her over." The blood pumped profusely from the wounds for a minute, and then started to slow. Damian came around the table and observed the wound like a teacher grading a med student.

"It looks like she might have just died, so you can turn her over, I guess."

Amelia quickly untied Five and without the offer of help from Damian turned her over on the table so she was laying flat. Her skin was getting paler, and the blood ran off the table and glooped, thickly, to the floor. Damian leaned over and turned the tap on to start the water. *Thanks*. She flipped the flap of Five's hair over and cut down the back of her head to release the hair.

"Nice wig," Damian said. "Put it on the bottom of the table." He stepped back, still watching her.

"What now?" Amelia sighed.

"Cut out her kidneys."

At least she was already up the right way. Amelia's anatomy wasn't perfect but at least she should be able to do this without too much problem. She took the longer knife she already had and started to slice down the spine and along the base of the ribcage, peeling the skin back and creating a flesh doorway to gain access to the organs. She reached in and ran her fingers around the kidney on the left and started to part it from the rest of the body. The flesh was wet. Warm. It was like sticking her hand in a casserole that had been out of the oven for an hour. Once she had the kidney parted from the mesentry connective tissue, she sliced the veins, cutting through the aorta, and let the weight of it fall into her hand. She lifted it carefully to the end of the table, and then did the same with the second one.

Blood striped her arms. Amelia's hands were deep red and crusting as she wiped herself with a rag, waiting for the next instruction.

"Good," said Damian. "Now come to the kitchen, and bring it all."

Amelia squinted at the hair, but said nothing. She scooped up the two kidneys and the scalped hair and left the shed, followed by Damian. “So you don’t want her smoked?” she asked. Most unusual given the current trend in his desires.

“Maybe later,” he replied closing the door to the shed. He looked up into the sky. “Going to be dark soon. Must be time for dinner.”

C H A P T E R 1 5

The two of them returned to the house, entering through the back door. Amelia looked at Five's bag, discarded to the side. She would have to get rid of that. Regardless of how this had—and was going to—play out, she still needed to get away with murder. She kicked off her outside shoes, still holding the kidneys and the hair. The kidneys were pretty clean—she'd done a good job—and the hair had been cut off long enough for it to be a crusty dried mess. So nothing was dripping on the floor.

She looked at Damian, eyebrows raised. "You can put those on the side," he said, gesturing to the telephone table they used to keep the dogs toys in, before they'd died of old age. Amelia did as she was told and placed it all down. "Strip," he instructed.

Amelia paused for only a second.

"Now," he barked.

She jumped. He would beat her again if she didn't do as he told her, so Amelia hurried to pull off her clothes. When he'd told her to dress for outside earlier, she had pulled on a baggy jumper, old jeans, and thick socks. She dragged the jumper off over her head, and unbuttoned the jeans. She wiggled and they shimmied down her until she could step out of them. Then she bent forward and pulled her socks off. She stood back up, straight, wearing nothing but her bra and knickers. Damian shook his head tightly, his eyes widening slightly as he said *why have you stopped*, without speaking. Amelia reached around behind her and unhooked her bra slipping it off and letting it drop to the floor. Then she did the same with her knickers as she did with the jeans until she was naked.

Damian nodded in approval. "Better," he said. "I want the kidneys for dinner. Cook them for me."

Amelia moved to pick them up before he stopped her. "Oh," he said. "I was expecting to fuck Fiona, though, and you put pay to that, didn't you?"

"I saw you fucking her on the bed," Amelia said without thinking.

Damian slapped her across the face, snapping her head to the side. "I didn't enjoy that," he said. "Cunt," he muttered after. Amelia cowered a little, and then went for the kidneys again. "No," he said. "The hair. Put it on."

"What?" she asked quietly. This was getting worse. And not only that, she couldn't have felt any more vulnerable now.

"I want you to look like her."

Amelia reached over and picked up the scalped hair of Five. It was stuck together, cold, sticky, bits of flesh and blood gelatinous in the hair, fibres of the woman, her skin holding it all together. She put it on her head, over her own hair. She didn't argue. She didn't want Damian to do it himself. It would be … worse. He nodded, satisfied somehow, with what must look ghoulish.

Forgive the pun.

"Now cook," he said.

Amelia scooped up the kidneys and hurried into the kitchen. *Jesus fucking Christ*. He was going to want more from her than this. He wants to fuck. Amelia looked up at the hairs that flopped over her own, blood red and stained, as she pulled a frying pan from the cupboard. She turned the gas on and poured some oil in the pan, quickly pulling a paring knife from the cupboard drawer and cleaning the fleshy kidneys of sinews and such. Then she dropped them gently in the oil. They splattered.

He liked them rare.

"Do you want anything else with them?" she asked. She glanced over and he was already sitting at the table waiting. He was watching her. Watching her body. She wasn't even clean. There was blood on her that had gone through the clothes. Her hands still had Five's blood on them. He shook his head.

Amelia slipped a knob of butter into the pan and basted them, before sliding them on the plate and carrying them to the table. She placed the plate down and waited there, to be dismissed. Instead, he waved at the chair on the other side of the table and said, "Sit." Amelia walked around and pulled the chair out, sitting with him. As he requested. Demanded. She glanced around, uncomfortable in her nakedness, unlike other times she had been with him.

That, and the hair.

Damian watched her as he sliced into his kidney dinner. She hoped he choked. "What?" he asked, quietly.

Amelia just shook her head.

"I can't help liking to look at you."

"No," she replied. Amelia flicked the crusty death-wig hair from her face. She could feel it puckering against her own hair as it dried further, attaching itself in some macabre way.

"You can finger yourself, while you wait for me," he said.

"I'd rather wait."

"I'd rather you didn't." He rested his hand down on the edge of the plate—the one that held his knife. It really wasn't a request, not that she thought it was, but she had hoped. And now, she was sure that he was going to kill her. Amelia didn't know why she knew, but she knew. She looked down at her bloody fingers, tacky with Five's blood. Oh well. She reached down below the table's edge and spread her legs. "It's hardly fair that I can't see, now is it?" He grinned. Amelia slid out of the chair and moved it away from the table, and sat again. So that he *could see*. She ran her fingers over her pubic mound and started to caress herself, pretending that she was finger painting. "You really want to enjoy it." Amelia closed her eyes. She thought about Liz. She thought about how much she meant to her, in such a short period. She slid her bloody fingers inside herself, and pretended to enjoy it. Trying not to overdo it, she moaned and groaned, hoping that Damian was enjoying the show. Not that she wanted him to actually enjoy it, she just didn't want to take more of a beating.

She looked at him through a squint. He was watching, chewing. But he wasn't enjoying himself. He was punishing her. He was probably plotting how to kill her, too. Painfully. She tried to maintain her masturbatory illusion while looking around the room for a way out. It was her house too. She should know what to do to get out of this situation. A weapon? Something. Anything. Damian clattered his cutlery to the plate and snapped Amelia out of it. She was ploughing herself pretty well, but felt nothing. But she continued, as he just watched her. She added an extra *ooh* in to try and bolster the illusion.

CHAPTER 16

Damian got up and stomped over to her. He was clearly unimpressed with the performance. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out of the chair, pulling her towards the bedroom. “Slut,” he said. Amelia kept up with him. She knew he was going to fuck her before he killed her.

As was his way.

Now, she supposed, was the time to fight back. Amelia pulled herself away from him. If she could get from his grip, then perhaps she stood a chance. She regretted not running while he was eating. She should have tried to get from the house. “Fuck you,” she blurted, gripping her fingers into a fist and punching him hard in the side of the head.

Damian faltered, but he didn’t let go. He pulled her close to him. Like he had when he head-butted her. He had his hands wrapped around the tops of her arms, and was too strong. She couldn’t move. He kissed her.

Amelia had the fleeting thought. Was he trying to be sexy? Dominant? Was this all part of some shitty game he was playing in his head? Or was he just being him. Right until the end? She decided to make the choice for him, and she bit him. Digging her teeth as hard as she could into his lip. Feeling the blood gush from his flesh into her mouth. “Fuck,” he half screamed, half mumbled, a mouth full of blood. He pushed her away. Hard. She fell from his grip to the floor, taking a chunk of his lip with her. It wasn’t enough. She wanted more. But it was certainly enough to piss him off. Disfigure those good-fucking-looks. She couldn’t help it. She spat his lip onto the carpet, jellified and gross, and started to laugh.

Damian stepped forward and kicked her in the gut. She felt puke rise from her stomach, but not reach her mouth. It burned. Acrid. The blow took all the wind from her and she curled up into a foetus. Still laughing—as best she could with no air in her. Damian dragged her by her foot across the floor to the hallway and onto the stairs.

He flipped the light on, illuminating the top floor.

Then he pulled her up the stairs. Naked. Beaten purple. Covered in blood. Other peoples. His. Still giggling uncontrollably.

Her head thumped on step after step. The carpet burned her skin. And as she was dragged almost upside down, the vile puke finally evacuated her

body. She puked down the stairs. It dribbled out onto her skin, the light burn of stomach acid and bile leaving her unfazed. At the top of the stairs he pulled her across the rug to the door of the bedroom. He was barely straining. He dropped her leg and opened the door. “Get up,” he ordered.

Amelia just laughed at him. “Pussy boy,” she quipped. It earned her a quick jab in the mouth. Her head snapped back. The lights went out for a second as the pain of a thousand head-butts launched across her face, nose, and mouth. She tasted the iron as blood filled her mouth and she slumped back on the rug. Fucking hell. As she lay there, eyes closed, trying to get her bearings back, she rolled her tongue around in her mouth and found a newly chipped tooth. Somewhere near the front. Hard to tell. Everything felt swollen.

She was moving again.

He’d picked her up by the shoulders and dragged her into the bedroom. She smiled and felt blood weep down her chin. “You gonna fuck me pretty boy?” The words came out strange.

“Bitch,” he said.

She felt herself pulled onto the bed. Amelia opened her eyes enough to see shadows in the room, moving. The light hurt her eyes. She could see his silhouette standing at the end of the bed. He was messing with his trousers. Taking them off. Something.

Then came a striking pain on Amelia’s calves. Burning. She whimpered in pain. She pulled her eyes open enough to see him standing over her, holding his belt. *Cunt*. He drew back his hand again, and this time Amelia braced, before the leather strapped against her bare flesh. She cried out.

Then he rolled her over, onto her stomach. She could feel the blood on her face. Blood off the sheets. She didn’t even know whose it was anymore. Then pain again. He was belting her arse. Like she was some sort of Catholic school girl. She felt heat on her legs, on her sides. It might have been blood. Piss? Maybe just the feeling radiating down her like poison. When the pain stopped, she listened. He was disrobing.

He turned her again on the bed and she looked. He was naked too, now. He pulled her legs apart, and crawled between them. He still had the belt. He was hard. She could see it moving in the shadows.

She felt him stick it in her, as he loomed over her, pushing himself into her. Then he drew back the belt and brought it down, this time across her breasts. The pain was like fire. It made everything else she'd felt today pale. She didn't have the strength to move. She wanted to fight.

Or die.

He pounded against her as she lay there, whipped her each time he pushed back into her. Deeper and deeper.

Then he stopped. She felt him leave her. That probably meant he was done. Finished. And that he was going to kill her now seemed a relief, somehow. He got off the bed. Every inch of Amelia hurt. Stinging. Broken. Bleeding. She tried to open her eyes and failed. The strength was absent, and the fluids that she had over her, glued her together. It might have been the only thing holding her together.

"You're so beautiful," he said. He spoke with surreal integrity. His voice was tinged with lust. Amelia reached up with her hand. Moving might have gotten her another whip, but she knew she couldn't feel worse. She brushed it over her eyes taking enough goo from them to be able to open them just a little.

Damian was standing next to the bed. He wasn't looking at her. He was facing the door. He was still hard, that much she could tell. He was speaking, but her hearing seemed to be fazing in and out. She tried to move her head. See what was happening. He stepped away from the bed. There was someone else there.

She could feel the blackness of unconsciousness beckoning her forward, but she fought against it. Her head rocked to the side, she could see the shape of another person.

A woman.

She was beautiful. She radiated desire.

Damian looked like he was begging her. He was begging her to be with him.

Amelia closed her eyes, and slipped into blackness.

C H A P T E R 1 7

Liz sat on the bed looking at her, as Amelia opened her eyes. “You look sore,” she said. It was still night time. Liz brought a warmth with her that enveloped Amelia. It made the pain easier, somehow. “But don’t try to move. He’s done a real job on you.”

“Where is he?” Amelia asked.

“He’s in the shower. A simpering wreck.” She smiled warmly. “You just need to relax. I have full control of him now.”

“How did you find me?”

Liz reached down beside the bed and lifted Five’s bag. “Mobile phone tracker. I put them on all my girls … just in case.”

Amelia nodded. Everything hurt. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh,” she said. “You can watch.”

Damian returned to the room and walked over to the side of the bed where Amelia lay, Liz sitting on the edge, beside her. He was vacant. He looked like Five did. And Four. Lost somewhere in his own mind, under some spell. Good. *Motherfucker*. “I want you to bring a table up to the bedroom. I want the tools that you use to cut people up. Bring them all.”

—

Amelia sat in the bed, leaning against the pillows. Damian had brought a decorating table up to the bedroom and placed it in the centre of the room. He’d emptied all of the tool drawers from the tool shed, and had laid them out on the floor next to it. Now he lay there, on the table.

“Did you know,” Liz said, “that I am a fully qualified surgeon?”

Amelia shook her head. Of course not.

“You have to do something with your time, right?”

That made Amelia feel a little stupid. She’d done nothing with her time. Not really. She could cut people up real well. She could fuck like a porn star. She could pick up men without speaking. She was great at Mario Kart. But none of that really amounted to being a doctor, did it? Fucking hell. What a waste. Liz went over to the tools and looked down at them. “Not

bad," she mused. "Most of it should be okay." She glanced over to Amelia. "You have a sewing kit?"

Amelia nodded. "In the bathroom cupboard." Probably a stupid place to keep it.

Liz went and got it and returned to Damian. He was just lying there, unresponsive to all around him. "What we're going to do, is make him pay." She leaned over his face. He started smiling a little at the sight of her. "Aren't we?" she asked like he was a child or a pet or something. "The thing about having this sort of control over them, is that when I'm this close they can't break out of it." She spoke to Amelia but worked on Damian, running her fingers down his skin. Amelia was surprised that his cock didn't react to it, but that was all part of the control, she supposed.

"He can feel. He just can't move," she said.

"We have a drug that'll do that, if you prefer."

Liz shook her head. "It's far more intense, if I do it myself." She smiled and picked up one of the larger knifes. She worked quickly, like she had been practicing medicine for a hundred years. Maybe she had?

She split the skin near the top of the femur of Damian's left leg. She carved around him like a surgeon. Parting the flesh, she worked carefully, not like they had, there was no disruption of the bodily circuits of blood. She just butchered the flesh from the bone. When Liz reached Damian's first artery, she pinched it hard at the top, and cut below it. She sutured it closed, and moved on. The knives went through the gaps around the bone. Boning a chicken, Amelia thought. More arteries cut, stitched. There was little blood.

Damian stared forward, that small, dead smile on his face.

Liz took the saw and cut down through the bone, until the leg was released, with only the skin on the back of it still attached. Back to the small knife, she slashed down the soft tissue on the back of the leg, leaving enough skin and flesh attached to the newly created stump to cover it. She pulled the leg away and dropped it into the waste bin by the table. "We don't want to eat that, now do we?" she said quietly. She wasn't addressing Amelia, just musing. Then she moved onto the next limb. The left arm.

And the same again.

Cut the flesh. Seal the arteries. Cut the bone. Shape the skin.

Then the other two limbs.

And Damian lay there, staring beautifully out into space. At nothing. Smiling.

Then Liz rethreaded the needle with a stronger, thicker cotton, and began sewing his skin flaps up, until he lay there without arms or legs. And still there was so little blood. Liz glanced over. It had taken her about an hour. "You must be thirsty," she said. She left the bedroom, and returned a few moments later, carrying champagne. She poured Amelia a glass, but not one for herself. "I just need to get this finished," she said.

Amelia picked the glass from the bedside table and took a sip. Watching her work was somewhat therapeutic, however, what she was doing was downright fucking relaxing.

Liz returned to Damian and wiped him down, then back with the thinner cotton, pinched his eyelids out and began sewing them shut. She bit the cotton in two before tying it off. First the left eye and then the right.

The small knife. She slid it into Damian's neck. Slipping it around, Amelia watched, unsure what she was doing. Then she pulled the knife out and sewed the slit shut, blood leaching from the cut, onto his neck, down onto the table. She wiped it clean.

And still the blind, arm-less, leg-less, monstrosity smiled.

And still Amelia sipped the champagne.

Liz looked over at her. "It just makes it easier for us." She smiled, and then left the room again, saying, "I just need …" before disappearing. Amelia looked at Damian. He was just lying there, staring, his cock hanging flaccid between two stumps. She wondered how long he would live for like that.

Then Liz returned. She struggled through the door with the small table from the spare room. One that Amelia had tried to learn crochet on before—like most other things—giving up on it because it was too hard. She never had the concentration.

Liz put the table up against the wall, and then returned to Damian. She gathered him up like a coddled baby, and carried him over to it.

She stood him on it like a mannequin.

Still, he didn't move.

Liz walked over to the bed and sat on the edge, finally taking herself a glass of champagne.

"Very nice," Amelia said. "Ornamental."

"Oh," Liz replied, sipping the sparkling liquid. "You haven't seen anything." She clicked her fingers.

Like a magician revealing the grand surprise, Damian was released from the hold, the control, that Liz had over him, and all the pain came flushing out. His vocal cords cut, his arms and legs gone, his sight taken, his stumps writhed, invisibly trying to grab things that weren't there. His mouth opened, but nothing came out, a permanent silent scream, his face contorting in agony.

"And we can keep him alive for months," Liz said.

Amelia smiled. "You never said you were an artist."

The End

B L O O D S T A I N G I R L

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

"But I want to go to a hotel." Angelica sat in the passenger seat of the car as the world shot by. Don was driving too fast—as usual—and even faster now they had left the motorway and were heading into the forest. The road had gotten so narrow that she had even joked that it was turning into a country lane. If they met anything coming the other way, unless Don was quick off the mark, they were fucked. "Can't you slow down?" She looked over to him to try and gauge his attitude.

Don worn a wry smile. "Anything else?" he asked quietly.

She knew he was just fucking around. Of course he was just fucking around, but even so, the cheek of it. "I only get one week off in the summer months. Last year you *said* we could go to Spain." Ang looked over the car seat into the back. "So why are we going to Scotland, of all places, hiking?"

"It's good for you."

So that was the end of the conversation, right? She turned and faced out the windscreen again. "Do you even know where you're going? You haven't got the GPS on."

"I know."

Of course he did. *Fucking hell*. Ang looked at her phone. It was only ten in the morning. They had a whole day of hiking ahead of them. Joy. Don suddenly indicated, and took a turn off to the left. The car went sharply from what she had said was a country lane, to what was a dirt track. "Fucking hell," she said, out loud this time.

"You'll have fun," he said.

Ang nodded. "Fun." She listened to the branches scrape down the side of the rental as Don drove too fast down there, too. She watched as he changed gear, dropping down one. He really did seem to know where he was going. Google Maps, she supposed. The car travelled for another ten minutes or so. Ang judged the time and speed, and guessed that they had probably gone five miles or more from the road. She should have looked at the milometer.

Eventually they came to a clearing.

There were parking spaces. Rudimentary ones, sure, but parking spaces nonetheless. There was one other car there. No people. Don pulled into a

space on the other side of the car park to the other car. The best way to avoid getting the doors scratched, and a technique he used in the supermarket. She thought about the branches that had probably scratched the car to shit. Not her problem. He was the one who had rented it. She wanted to be in Spain. No branches there, she thought. Well, there probably were, but they wouldn't be driving down fucking tracks. They'd be on the beach. She looked at the time again. Ten-thirty. What was the time difference between here and Spain? One hour? Nine in the morning? Probably. Probably sitting on the beach, warm to the bone. A glass of some cocktail. *Already?* Yes. We're on holiday.

Don opening the door snapped her out of it. "Come on," he said. "We've got miles to do before we can bivouac down for the night."

Oh god. He was already turning woodsy.

Don swung his legs out and stood, stretching. "Smell that air," he said. She could. Even in the middle of fucking June it was drab up here. Cold. Wet. The moisture clung to the air like spider-monkeys. The chill invaded the car and Ang wrapped her fingers around her bare arms. Don leaned down. "Come on," he said. "There's a jumper in the back."

Ang shook her head. How had she let it get this far? She opened her door and braced the cold Scottish air, hurrying around to the boot and opening it. She took the thick wool jumper and pulled it over the vest she was wearing. At least it was warm when they left the city, two hours ago. Maybe three now. She rolled her fingers into a fist and pulled them in and out to keep them warm. Don opened the back door of the car and pulled out the pack with the tent on it. "I've got this one." He laughed.

Like she was going to carry *that* one.

Spain.

Fuck.

Ang took the second pack from the boot and swung it around her, strapping it across the front. They'd been hiking before. They'd done it when they were dating. She'd made the mistake of saying she enjoyed it, too much, apparently. Now she was tethered to it for the rest of her life. Over the last couple of years work had gotten in the way, and the quickest way to hike was to hit the airport and travel to Europe, which she'd always blagged into a trip to somewhere she'd always wanted to see. So *shall we*

go hiking became *I always wanted to see Luxemburg*. But it hadn't washed this year.

She looked up at the trees that faced them. They looked like pines. She never had been any good at identifying anything. "Map?" she asked. It was instinct. She rocked her boots into the ground to make sure they were tight. It royally fucked everything if you got blisters at the end of the first day. Even hiking straight back would mean a ten mile plus walk in pain. And Don clearly had a more long term week planned. He was probably trying to see if they could hit Denmark on foot. She snorted at the thought.

Don had the map in his hand and a compass. Old fashioned one. One like they used to use back in the day. Before they were married. Before every mobile phone had a compass built in.

"Why don't you use Google? And the GPS?" She walked over to him. It was surprising how quickly she fell back into the posture that she needed to walk with the weight on her. Don already had the other pack on his back and the car was now locked.

"Why? Where's the fun in that?" he asked. "Besides …" he pulled his phone from his pocket. "How are you going to keep it charged? I've turned it off in case we need it in an emergency."

Ang looked around the trees. "You know better than me, but you think we'll get a signal up here?"

He shrugged. "Better to have enough battery to find out, right?" He turned his attention back to the map and the compass.

He was right. Ang pulled her phone out and switched it off. At least it was fully charged. At the edge of the car park, she squinted into the trees to try and see what the landscape was like. She couldn't check before because Don wouldn't tell her where they were going.

It didn't look all that pretty to be honest.

C H A P T E R 2

Ang walked on the slope in front of Don as he had insisted. She felt like they had been going upwards forever. They'd only just left the car park. She reached for her phone to look at the time and then remembered it was off. "How do I know what time it is?" she called back.

"Why does it matter?" Don called from behind her.

"Because I'm hungry," she muttered, making sure he hadn't heard her. She breached the top of this particular hill and the trees gave way enough for her to see her surroundings. There was a drop from there, meeting another, longer hill at the bottom. That one rose away to higher than they were now. The trees were dense. From there she could see the hill in front, and to the left and right the trees stopped her from seeing much at all. The walking helped with the cold, but as soon as she stopped, she felt it creeping into her clothes.

Don walked up next to her. "Come on," he said, grinning. "No dawdling."

How was this supposed to be fun? She'd gotten over it years ago. Maybe she should have made that clearer? "Is it going to warm up?"

Don looked at the sky. "When we're clear of the trees, probably, yes." He smiled still and gestured for her to continue. Down the hill and up the other side. Just like the Grand Old Duke of York. She saw he still had the compass in his hand. Good. It was the only way to ensure they didn't walk in circles, even if her *internal* compass was pretty good.

Ang nodded, and continued without word.

The walk up the hill was easier somehow than the walk down. Picking her way through the undergrowth was treacherous. The ground was wet, mossy. One wrong move and she would plummet into the mud. The last thing she needed. She could hear Don behind her, but didn't look back. "So how far do we need to go today?" she asked.

"Well …" Ang could hear him breathing hard. Good. At least he was out of practise too. "… I've got a clearing marked. As long as there's no one else using it, then we pitch down there. Then I planned on leaving the tent there, and hiking out and back daily. That way we don't need to drop the tent each night.

That was something.

—

They stopped for lunch at some point—far later than Ang had thought was lunchtime—and walked until it seemed to be getting dark. "Where's this clearing?" she asked. It was getting late. Putting a tent up in the dark was no fucking fun. Largely impractical. And to be honest, quite dangerous. Don was walking next to her at this point. He glanced at the compass, then the map, the two of them stopped. Stood. They were on flat ground now, but the trees were imposing. Darkness shrouded them, even though when you looked up, you could see the sky, still blue. But the shadows grew darker.

"It should be around here, somewhere." He pointed the compass in a direction that was indistinguishable from any other to the naked eye. "This way. Not long." He strode off with purpose.

Ang hurried to catch up. It was easier to walk on the flat. "We could pitch here," she said.

"No." He nodded forward. "The clearing is better. Look …" He pointed into the trees. "Light."

Ang increased her step. The sudden thought of finally dropping the pack and resting was unsurprisingly enticing. The two of them walked through the last of the trees towards the light. Shadows loomed, low and long, unsettling. As they reached the edge of the forest, Ang could see the clearing. It was small, flat, and overgrown. Around the size of a football pitch. She could clearly see a structure. "Fuck," she whispered, sure that Don would be able to see it too.

"What?" he asked.

"Look," she said. "I don't know how out of date your intel is, but this clearing is taken."

The two of them reached the edge of the treeline and stopped. Don stared at the cabin on the edge of it. He frowned. "Well." He unhooked the strap across his chest and swung his pack from his shoulders.

"Now what?" Ang asked. It was bad form to pitch in the same space as someone else when you were surrounded by hundreds of square miles of open land. Even if it was just for one night.

“I was sure,” he said. He had opened his pack and was rummaging for something.

“Sure of what?” she asked, absently. Ang was already looking around the landscape to try and see somewhere else close enough for them to get to, before it was too dark to see, and they ended up putting up their tent just inside the treeline out of sight of the cabin, but ankle deep in mud and moss and shit. There would be more wildlife activity inside the treeline too.

Don pulled some paperwork from his bag. “Ah,” he said. “There it is.” He held it up for her to take.

Ang looked at the papers. They were the rental details for a cabin. She looked at the picture on the paper and then to the cabin across in front of her. “You fucker.”

Don laughed. “You seriously thought I was going to dump you in the middle of the Highlands in this.” He waved his hands about gesturing at the climate. “Really?”

“You bought a fucking tent you sponge. What was I supposed to think?”

Don stood and pulled his backpack onto one shoulder. “Come on then.”

C H A P T E R 3

The inside of the cabin was warm. Warmer than even Don was expecting, he admitted. It was also immaculate. As it should have been, he had muttered, something about how much he paid for it. Ang could still smell the polish. The company that cleaned it must have been in earlier that day. "How did they get here to clean?" she asked, as she absently opened and closed drawers in the kitchen.

"Who knows?" Don was pushing the folded tent under the luscious king sized bed. "We won't need that for a week."

"So." She turned to him. The cabin was open plan. There was—thankfully—a fully equipped bathroom in a second room, and out the back a Jacuzzi type pool, but apart from that it was all one room. There was a snug sofa thing going on, a TV that worked and had a good number of channels, and a fully fitted kitchen. The fridge and freezer were stocked. It was made to be a perfect, quiet, secret getaway.

Don got up from the floor and sat on the bed.

"What are we supposed to do with this week of ours?"

"Prepare for the walk back?" He laughed.

"How about fuck?" She pushed herself away from the kitchen unit and walked across the room to Don.

"Hey, heyyy," he replied.

"Shut up, Krusty." Ang pulled the thick jumper she was still wearing from the walk off, over her head. The open fire crackling in the fireplace. The open space smelt of burning wood. Apple. Or Oak. Whatever. Don made an agreeable noise. Good. She thought briefly about taking them out to the pool, but then thought better of it. She could see through the window that it was dark now. It crossed her mind to close the curtains, but what was the point, right? They were in the middle of nowhere. She smiled at him. She could see that look in his eyes. He wanted her. He wanted her now. "Gonna fuck me?" she said. It wasn't really a question. It was an order. He didn't reply, so it didn't matter.

Ang unbuckled her jeans and popped the buttons. She let them hang open. It let him see her underwear. She was expecting the hike so he got an eyeful of active pants. Firm, comfortable. Sexy as snot. He reached his

hands forward, beckoning her towards him. She did as he wanted. Walked to him. Slowly. Let him see her swagger. He pulled her in, between his legs as he perched on the bed. He pulled up her vest and kissed her belly. She could feel him nestling against her sports bra. It was tight. Gave her the body of a small boy. *Very attractive*. She stepped back and pulled the vest off. Then the bra. With the sigh of relief—that fucker was tight—she discarded it to the floor. Onto some sort of bearskin rug. Probably fake. He pulled her forward again. Wrapped his fingers around her waist. Since they'd gotten married the waistline had gotten larger, but not much. She was still proud of her figure, and could still hike for miles, apparently.

Ang pulled her head back as he took her nipple in between his teeth and bit down lightly, pulling on it. She grunted some satisfaction. "Fucking hell," she muttered. His hands were everywhere, as she just stood there, enjoying it. She felt her jeans come down. He peeled them off, the sheen of sweat from the walk leaving them damp and tight. Shit. She should have showered. Too late now. Don didn't seem to mind. Her jeans were around her ankles. Boots long gone, as soon as they were in the cabin. She stepped out of the denim. Socks pulled off. Probably sweaty. Don't care anymore. "Fuck me," she said. It came out as a whine. Don giggled lightly. His fingers were around the sports pants. He pulled them off her arse. Don spun her around and started to kiss her butt cheeks. She let out a small yelp of pleasure, then his fingers were around the front of her, sliding in and out of the hair on her mound, slipping around her heat, she felt like she was going to explode right then.

Don moved her forward, and stood. He slipped her hair over her shoulder and started to kiss the back of her neck, one hand caressing and exploring her body. Ang shuddered. She felt Don's touch and it electrified her. "Oh, God," she muttered. Don slid his fingers between her legs gently touching her, enough to make sure she was wet, she thought. Which she was. He turned her back around and kissed her lips, looking into her eyes.

"I want you," he said.

Ang just nodded, for some reason she was breathless.

He pulled her over to the bed and sat her down, laying her back onto the warm blankets. He brought himself down on top of her, keeping her from moving with just his body weight. Don took her hands and held them above her head. "You move," he said, "and I'll stop." Ang daren't move as

Don kissed his way down her body, pausing to lick and tease her breasts, and then further down, pushing her legs gently apart and then kissing her, licking her, all the while watching her, his piercing eyes gazing up her body, judging her reactions to his touch. He flicked his tongue over her clit, making her spasm with joy. He made sure to linger long enough for her to rupture into orgasm before he stopped. He looked up at her, breathing hard.

"I want you inside me," she said.

"As you wish." Don got up. He was rock hard. Ang could see him struggling and straining inside his cargo trousers. He hadn't even undone them and she'd already finished.

Already finished for the first time, she thought. Don pulled his trousers down releasing his cock. It protruded at a crude angle through his pants. He dragged his t-shirt off over his head. He was sculpted, but not muscular. He dropped his pants. His cock wasn't big, but he knew what to do with it. Ang smiled.

"Get on your knees," he said, grinning.

Ang obeyed. She quickly got over onto all fours. His cock would hit better points from this angle. She felt him get on the bed and before she knew it, his fingers were inside her, gently swirling around, making contact with her walls, making sure she was ready. Then he withdrew, and pushed his cock inside her. She shuddered with ecstasy, arching her back to make sure she had all of it inside her. It felt so much larger like that.

Then he started to pound her. Hard.

He had obviously built up a thirst while he was between her legs, because he wasted no time. The harder he thrust, the more she pushed against him. She giggled lightly hearing his balls slap against her arse, moist with either sweat or pussy juice. He grunted. He was close. He pushed harder. He was going to cum quickly.

Oh.

Cramp.

"Shit," Ang blurted, and Don stopped, mid motion.

"What?" he said quietly.

"I'm going to …" The pain started to run up her calf. It was all that damned walking. Fucking hell.

“What? Fart? Shit? Talk to me?”

Ang started to laugh as the cramp spasmed the muscle in her leg and she yanked hard forwards to turn and get the weight off her leg. It seemed that the motion, and perhaps the surprised of it was all too much for Don. As Ang rolled onto her back, grabbing at her leg to massage it, Don came hard, still kneeling where he was. Long strings of ejaculate flicked across Ang as she tried to get on her back, and the two of them were left, Ang on her back, rubbing her leg, and Don kneeling in the middle of the bed, cum everywhere. “Fuck,” said Don. “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Ang laughed harder, rubbing her leg and rolling about. In pain, but certainly seeing the funny side.

C H A P T E R 4

Ang showered first—most of it was on her—and she made coffee while she waited for Don to wash. She stood at the window. Outside, she could make out where the treeline broke the skyline. The sky was a deep blue, stars visible. The moon. Below the trees was nothing but blackness. She looked down at herself. She was standing there with only a towel wrapped around her waist.

She pulled the curtains.

It made the cabin warmer, somehow.

—

Dan came over the top of the hill watched by Ang. He'd stopped some time back to look at something and she'd kept walking. One thing that Ang did remember from the years of walking is that stopping can be the worst thing to do. And last night's cramp was something to behold, so she certainly didn't want a replay of that one—not while they were out walking, anyway.

So a gentle walk it was. They hadn't even brought food. Ang waited for him to catch up, putting her weight on one foot and then the other in some simulation of walking. Maybe it would help.

"Head back?" he asked.

Yes, she thought. *They were*. She'd already circled back towards the cabin without him realising it. Her internal compass was pretty fucking good—even if she did say so herself—once she had a base to focus on. "It's just down the next ridge." She looked up at the trees. "It's so dense," she said. "Nothing like Wales."

"No." Their hiking trip in Wales had taken them across the Beacons. Not a tree for miles. The forest here was as dense as anything they'd seen leaving the car. While they hadn't needed it this time, Ang had made sure that Don had taken the compass and map. Just in case. Getting lost out here would be no joke. Hundreds of square miles of trees. No people. She started down the hill, back into the trees. The roots wound their way out of the ground and she and Don were careful not to fall—although they did come in useful for keeping footing. Even now, in the middle of a bright sunny day, the ground was still wet beneath the shadow of the trees.

They came to the base, the trees thinning as they got closer, until the clearing was revealed. “See,” she said. “Told you.” They had come out on the opposite side to the cabin and crossed, not three hours after they’d left.

Don got to the door first and pulled it open, waving Ang inside. She kicked the mud off her boots before stepping into the cabin onto the mat inside and pulling the laces on her boots undone. “Fuck it,” she said. “Lunch?”

“Oh yes.” Don started to remove his boots as Ang finished. She went over to the fridge and pulled it open. When they had arrived it was filled. Plentiful. She had asked Don how they knew what to put in there, and he’d just said that they put in what they felt like. *It was all part of the service*. She pulled out some ham and grapes. There was a sourdough loaf. Ang wasn’t sure if a loaf should be kept in the fridge, but to be honest, the fire was roaring and the last thing she wanted was dried out bread. She put the ham on the side and went over to the bed. She was sticky from the walk, but a normal sticky. A relaxed sticky.

Moist.

She pulled her thin coat off and the jumper from underneath, tossing them to the rug. Looked at the drawers of the cabinet next to the bed. Don had left them open. She stood. Best get some clean underwear and have a quick shower before she made sandwiches. She pulled the half-open drawer all the way. On one side of it were her t-shirts, the other, her knickers, bras. Don had no reason to open it even, unless it was in error, and the cheeky fucker had even had a good rummage. She looked at her knickers and straightened them up. Don was over by the door still, dressing down. “You don’t have to smell my *clean* knickers,” she said, shooting him a wink.

“What?” he replied, absently.

“Keep your mitts out my pantie drawer.”

Don closed the door of the cabin. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said coming over to her side. “My stuff is in the bottom drawer.”

“*I* know that.”

“*I* haven’t touched your stuff.” He flashed her a smile that meant he wasn’t actually joking.

“Then who’s been in my drawer?”

"Maybe it was you, Goldilocks." He shrugged. "You taking a shower?"

Ang nodded, and took a clean pair from the pile. She eyed them dubiously. Then took them to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. She was sure she hadn't left the drawer open. That was such a *boy* thing to do. She looked at the lotions and soaps on the side next to the sink. Had they moved too? She drew back the shower curtain over the bath and looked in, suspiciously. Paranoia, she thought. Had to be. Fucking hell. She really did need a holiday. Ang turned on the power shower and let the water run for a moment, before pulling off her sweats and rolling down her tighty-whities—ugh—and stepping in. The water was hot. Scolding, as she liked it. She let it run over her nakedness for a couple of minutes before taking her shower soap and lathering it over her body. She let the water run through her hair, but didn't wash it. She wanted to be quick.

She was only in there five minutes.

Ang dried off and pulled her clean knickers on, wrapping a towel around her. Even with the fire burning, she could feel the cold air running under the door into the bathroom. Shit. She should have brought the rest of her clean clothes in with her.

Picking up her dirty clothes, she decided that she should try hand washing the sweatiest. Perhaps. She screwed up her face at the thought of it. Maybe get pervert Don to clean her undies with his tongue. Cheeky sod. She opened the door of the bathroom and stepped out into the cabin.

Don wasn't there.

"Hey?" she called out instinctively, although she could see pretty much every inch of the room from where she stood. Where was he? Hiding under the bed? "Huh." Maybe he'd gone out for firewood? She looked at the open fire. Sure enough there was a pile of logs next to it. Ang peered out the window. She couldn't see him. There was a light mist descending, but she could still see the other side of the clearing. She went to the other side of the cabin—the side that faced the forest. He wasn't out there either. "Well," she said. "First the knickers, now the husband." Ang went to the bed and quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt.

She went to the door and opened it. The cold bite of the air grabbed at her and she wrapped her arms around her. "Don," she called. "Honey? Where are you?" Nothing. *Well, that's real fucking funny*. "No appearance,

no puss-puss." Still nothing. The threat of having his conjugals cut off was usually enough to get him running. She stepped back and closed the door.

C H A P T E R 5

Ang had put her boots back on and gone outside and looked around. Don wasn't anywhere around the cabin. Not in the cabin. He must have gone back to the treeline. *It was the only place he could be*. She now sat on the sofa staring at the wall.

He'd been gone an hour. Maybe more.

She still had her boots on. She went over to his coat—still hung on the hook inside the door. Exactly where he'd left it. She checked the pockets. The compass and map were still there. Ang pulled her coat over her t-shirt and left the cabin, closing the door behind her, and taking the compass and map. She got her bearings quickly—something that Don always did—and then headed out towards the trees. She went in the direction that they'd gone this morning.

It didn't make any sense for him to go in any other direction, fuck, it didn't make any sense for him to go in *this* direction, but she had to do something.

She strode across to the trees. There was a track carved out in the grasses. Not an official path or anything, just where the grass had been killed off from being walked on so many times. Other walkers. Other renters. It was the route they had taken that morning. Don had said it was going to be funny to see how weak willed other hikers were in comparison to them. It was true. The track had died off shortly after it had led to the first hill up. "*Don*," she called into the darkness of the forest. She looked back to the cabin. She didn't think to bring a torch. The mist was heavier now, than an hour ago, but it was still clear enough. But if she went in there for more than an hour or so, it was going to become hard to see shit.

Never mind. She wasn't going back now. She pulled her coat tight around herself. The mist was cold. And then she followed the track.

"*Don*." She called his name every few feet at first. Every few seconds. What if he'd hurt himself? What was she going to do about it, other than hike a day back to the car? No signal, she remembered him saying. Ang pulled her phone out of the pocket of her jeans and turned it on. She waited until it loaded. *Come on*. There was no signal. Worth a shot. She pushed it back into her pocket, and called out his name again. *What was he doing out here?*

She started up the hill. It was still light enough that she could see some through the trees. Behind her, she could still see the forest break to the clearing.

The darkness inside the trees was bleak. It always was. She hated it. It was one of the reasons she didn't like camping in hard tree regions. You couldn't see anything. It was impossible to know where you were in the dark. There was movement everywhere. Sure, during the day you didn't hear it. You didn't see it. It was easy for your body to not perceive it during the day, but the senses heightened at night. Fear heightened.

And here, in the darkness caused by the trees and the mist, everything was heightened. She called out Don's name again just to break the tension.

Something moved over to her left. Maybe ten feet away? More? Less? It was impossible to tell. Fuck. She didn't like any of this. The desire to return to the cabin and wait it out was great, but she couldn't leave him out there. After all this time … he *must* be hurt.

Then something drifted across her nose. She could smell something. It was acrid. Acidic. Something that she shouldn't be able to smell out here. It smelt like smoke, but not from a clean wood fire. Something manufactured. A barbecue lit with firelighters. It couldn't be coming from the cabin. She couldn't see anything though. She couldn't *hear* anything. Ang followed the hill up, slowly. She edged around the trees, kept looking back to make sure she knew where she was. Even for her, in this light, she might lose her way, and without a torch, the compass was pretty fucking useless. She kept up the hill, towards a ridge. There must be a fire somewhere in that direction.

Then she heard something. It wasn't the rustle of leaves, or the cracking of a stick. It was a snap. Single. Then movement. She looked back. She was too high now to see the clearing. Looking up, she could see it was getting dark. She continued up the hill to the top. From there, she could see nothing, but she could hear something. Over the next ridge along. Probably some half a mile from the cabin. The smell of burning was slightly stronger.

There had to be someone over there. Maybe Don? Maybe other campers? People who wanted to stay away from the cabin. Etiquette. Nice. She followed her nose in the direction she thought it was coming from. At least once she was with other people, she should be able to get her bearings again.

She continued until she heard something more. Hushed voices. Whispers. There were people. Not Don. But something, at least. Ang continued up the ridge slowly. Quietly. She wanted to see who was there before revealing herself. She didn't know what the people who lived up here—hunted up here—were like. She rounded a wide tree. There was light beyond. Fire. It was contained. Not so much bright as practical. They'd done a good job too, it wasn't giving off much in the way of smoke.

Hunters, then. Most likely.

Ang waited and watched. There were people. Movement, but she couldn't see much. She crossed to the next thick clump of trees. A woman, alone, out there. She wanted to make sure she was safe. She didn't even have a weapon. Should have bought a knife from the kitchen.

Too late now.

She crouched. She could see more from there.

There were three of them. They were doing something. One was sat by the fire. There was a tent. It was all so hard to see. They all looked like men.

One had a gun. A hunting rifle of some sort. Unusual to see, even, she assumed, in the wild trappings of Scotland.

Then one spoke. She couldn't hear what he said. Either he was being too quiet, or she was too far away. He didn't sound like he had the twang of a Scot accent though. Damn. What was going on? There was laughter. She got closer. She stayed low, and made her way forward, in the shadows. The darkness. Protected by the blackness of the trees behind her. She stood on something. A noise.

The men fell to silence.

She could see the one with the gun ready himself. He didn't raise it. He just pulled it closer, silhouetted by the flames beyond him.

The three men stood, staring. She couldn't see their faces, just their outlines. They could have been looking right at her. Perhaps they were, wondering why she was just standing there, watching. But she daren't move. Something wasn't right.

Then there was a noise from behind them. Beyond the fire. Something that she hadn't seen in the dark. Hidden in the trees. Two of the men turned. The two without the gun. *He still watched*. Still as a deer.

The others walked around the fire. There was a small commotion and they moved something. Lifted it.

They pulled something large from out of the leaves. Off the floor. A dead weight. It was just a silhouette, but it was clearly a person. *Don*. It was the only explanation. Ang's first reaction was to scream out, but she clapped her hand across her mouth. It was the only way she wouldn't make a noise. She instinctively wanted to call for help. She wanted to scream out for Don. Make sure it was him. But that was stupid. That was the last thing she should do.

She crouched again, still with the gunman staring into the treeline.

She waited.

They brought the dead weight to the fire and pushed it to the ground. With him behind the fire, she could see now. Not much—they were still too far away—but it was Don and he was still moving.

CHAPTER 6

The three men taunted him. She couldn't hear what, but it was in their body language. He looked like he wanted to move but couldn't. Bound, no doubt. But why? Want did they want? *Think*. She needed to get help—help that was a day's hike away. The phone didn't work. Damn it. *She had a torch on her phone*. Ang cussed herself for not remembering it before. She stayed where she was. Thinking. She was a day away from even being able to call the police.

Eventually the gunman seemed to lose interest in whatever the noise had been, and Ang could finally turn back, away from the ridge and made her way silently to the edge of it. She watched Don. He was lying there, face down now, in the wet dirt. She could see that he wasn't dressed properly. He wouldn't live through the night without warmth.

Dressed like that, it suggested they took him straight from the cabin. Why not kill him? Why not kill her? They could have pushed into the shower. She wouldn't have stood a chance.

She left the ridge behind her and started back to the cabin. The only thing she could do was to get back and arm herself. They may or may not plan to come get her. But she had to come back for them. It was the only way that she could save Don. She dropped down from the grass and ducked under the level of the ridge, down the hill.

Up the other side.

Ang climbed the next hill. She worried less about noise from there. She couldn't hear them. They couldn't hear her. She reached the top of the hill and looked down. Although it was dark now, she could still make out the break in the trees where the clearing started. She ran down. Slowly. No sense in breaking her leg at this point.

She broke the treeline and started to run proper. Without the trees, in the light of the moon, she could see well enough. She ran across to the cabin. Hard. Fast. She didn't know how long she had.

—

Ang burst through the door of the cabin and slammed it shut behind her. The heat inside pushed her back like a wall as she tried to get her breath back. Going straight to the kitchen drawers, she started through them.

Lifting out knives. Placing them on the counter top. Fuck. There was little in the way of weapons in a rental.

The axe, she thought.

There was wood for the fire outside. There must be an axe, right? A hatchet? Something. She headed for the door to the cabin just as it opened inwards. Ang stopped. A man. One. She held her breath, it was like it was taken from her suddenly. "What do you want?" she muttered, the words barely leaving her lips.

The man smiled.

He was young. Twenties, probably. Dark hair. He was wearing decent outdoors gear. Ang even recognised some of the brands. Proper mountain man shit. Expensive too. "I saw you cross the grass," he said.

Northern accent, but not from across the border. Shit, she was no good at this sort of thing. Like … fucking … Ant and Dec or some shit. Wherever they were from? Biker Grove. Brookside? He took a step forward when she didn't speak, and she met it with a step back, towards the kitchen area. Keeping the gap between them. "Get out," she said.

The man shook his head. "I don't think so."

"What do you want?" she asked again.

The man unzipped his weather-all. The heat in the cabin would have been burning him up inside. "Calm down, and no one needs to get hurt," he said. He gestured to the sofa. "Why don't you take a seat, and I'll get hold of my friends." He pulled out a two-way radio from inside the jacket, although he didn't raise it to his mouth. Instead he pointed it to the sofa. He was ordering her to go. Sit.

She shook her head. Don't obey, she thought. That's the worst thing you can do. Scream murder. Rape. But there's no one to hear. Just don't comply. "What have you done with Don?"

He nodded, sticking his bottom lip out. "That his name, is it?"

Shit. Maybe she shouldn't have said anything. She obviously gave something away in her look because he continued. "It's okay." He grinned. "But he can't say too much at the moment."

Ang backed away again. A little. Closer to the sink. She'd put a large knife on the counter. It was behind her somewhere. Fuck it. Why hadn't she

paid more attention to her surroundings? How far across the cabin was she? Where exactly did she put the knife? He took another step towards her. Shit. Think.

It was to the left of the sink. Right? Yes. She was sure. On the draining board. Where was the sink in comparison to her? To the right of the fridge. That was where she'd put the ham earlier. Right? *Right*? He took another step. He didn't take his eyes from her. They were dark. Menacing. She couldn't tell exactly what his objective was, but she knew it wasn't going to be good.

He took another step.

As he started to move, Ang knew that this step would get him almost close enough to lunge at her. She turned. Eyes on the counter. The knife. Right of the sink. Fuck. She hurled herself forward. Fear had pretty much paralysed the lower half of her body. She had a pain in her chest, her heart was beating so fast. Hand on the knife.

Then she felt hands on her.

He was on her. Behind her.

C H A P T E R 7

Ang tried to spin around. She couldn't stop what she couldn't see. He had hands everywhere. He'd gotten his arms around her waist. She could feel him pulling her into him. If he got too much of a purchase, she might not be able to squirm free. Panicked, Ang stabbed down at herself blindly. She felt the pain explode as the knife slid into her flesh. But his arms slid off her and she was free.

If only for a second.

She spun around and faced him. He was cradling his arm. She'd managed to slash him across the forearm, blood pumping out like he'd tried to cut his own fucking wrists. Good. She reached up with her free hand. Blood. On her. Hers. She had jabbed the tip of the knife hard and deep into her own gut.

The two of them weighed each other for a split second before he rushed at her. He managed to get his good hand around the wrist of her hand holding the knife and pushed it up, over her head. He was stronger than she was. He grabbed at her with the other hand, weakly. His blood was slipping and slopping over the pair of them, faster, harder, the more he fought. Ang brought her knee up hard. She missed his balls—which is what she was aiming for—but seemed to land decently in his gut, pushing him hard enough off balance, to be able to push her weight against him, knocking him off kilter. He staggered back, releasing her wrist and allowing her to be able to hold the knife at him. Suddenly the tables turned and it was a knife fight. One he had forgotten to bring a knife to.

He was starting to look a little pale too.

Ang thrust at him. Tried to get the blade deep into him. Split him open. Like a fucking piggy. He dropped to the side. Clearly had more practise in fighting than she did, and he had her from behind again. He pressured the knife from her hand. She didn't even know how. The blade clattered on the floor, and she felt his bloody hand on her. He was restraining her, her disarmed hand held across her body. He was feeling his way across her torso with his other hand. Motherfucker was enjoying himself.

She was about to kick backwards at him, when he found where she had plunged the knife into herself with the tips of his fingers and he inserted them into her. A sudden fire enveloped her, and Ang screamed. The feeling

of a thousand burning lanterns pushed against her skin. Then he drew them out. The pain not subsiding. Then in.

He was finger-fucking her wound.

Ang yanked her head backwards, colliding the back of her head with the front of his. He grunted. Stumbled, and let her go. Ang dropped to the floor. The pain was too much for her to keep on her feet. She grabbed at the wound, but the pain was everywhere now. He was still up. He was standing over her.

He kicked. Flat footed. Straight into her chest. Another burst of pain. Then she was on the floor. She was looking at the ceiling. Coughing. She couldn't get her breath.

He leaned over her. There was blood pouring from his nose. Good. Fucker. He wasn't smiling anymore. He had his radio again. Picked it up from on the floor somewhere.

I've got her, he said.

No response. Ang watched him. She didn't move. Didn't have the fight that second. The pain in her chest started to give way and the air started to creep back in. She had to fight. If she stopped now—whoever this was, and whatever they wanted—they'd won. She watched him go to the sink. He was spitting blood, and running the water.

Ang got to her knees.

She could feel the warmth of her blood on her t-shirt. She could feel every inch of her body wracked with pain. The knife. It was right there. Behind him. On the floor. She slid forward on her knees, ignoring her body, begging her to stop. Give in. Give up. She wrapped her fingers around the hilt. He still hadn't paid her enough attention to see that she wasn't laying helpless on the floor. The under-estimation hurt almost as much as the wound.

Then he turned.

She was still on her knees. Behind him on the floor. Looking up at him. He looked a little surprised at first and then angry, maybe. But she didn't wait to find out which. Ang thrust the knife upwards into him. She wasn't aiming for anything in particular. She just wanted to incapacitate.

The blade slid up, missing the bone, into the groin. Whatever his look was, it morphed into shock, as she pulled the knife out, and he rocked backwards, leaning against the sink behind him. She held the knife out, like she was going to stab him. He stared at her. Frozen.

She could see blood pounding out of him like he was pissing. That, and the blood still gushing from the wound on his arm, his face. He was probably about to bleed to death. They looked each other in the eyes for a brief second and then Ang stabbed upwards again. Same place. The guy grunted as she slipped the blade out of him. "What do you want?" she asked for the third time. He slid down the sink slightly.

Ang dragged herself up to her feet and stood, shaky. The pain in her gut was radiating outwards. The blood was still running from her, hot and sticky. She held the knife, pointed at him, hands wobbling from side to side. He never responded to her question. "What did you do with Don?"

He looked at her, but didn't move. Maybe he couldn't?

A sudden flood of thought, possibly motivated by panic, crashed into Ang. She had to move. They were going to be coming. She needed to get out. No. Be prepared. Something. Standing here wasn't helping. The man's eyes moved from hers down to the blade. He was waiting to see what she was going to do next. Or maybe he didn't have enough blood left to think straight. Ang looked from him to the blade.

Move, her mind was screaming at her.

Ang stopped shaking as a calm came over her. She took a single step forward, and thrust the blade, two handed into the man's belly. He let out some sort of inhuman gurgle. His hands came up and he wrapped them around Ang's still on the hilt. He looked her in the eye, but didn't try to stop her. He had no strength. He just held her, their blood, flowing together on their hands. He said something. Something so low and quiet that she couldn't understand him. But still he didn't drop. Ang pushed his hands from hers and pulled the knife back out. She stabbed it back in, indiscriminately into his gut. Out. In. Twice. Thrice. Then she stepped away for him to fall. He was taller than she was. It was the first time she noticed. But he leaned back, his hands steadying himself on the sink behind.

"Fucking hell," she muttered.

Ang thrust forward, knife in one hand. She pushed it in, up, under the rib cage, into the smooshy internal organs that were all in there somewhere. A light behind his eyes dulled as she watched. But didn't extinguish. She rolled the knife in her hand, still inside him, and the light went out. She pulled the blade away as she stepped back, and the man stumbled, fell, to the floor of the cabin. She watched him for a moment as the blood drooled out, seeping away from him.

She stepped to the side, baby-deer like, weak. She slid the knife onto the draining board, never taking her eyes from the man. He didn't move again. Dead or dying. Ang looked at her reflection in the window. She looked haggard. Then she realised the pain again. She cupped her stomach.

Faster.

Ang looked down at herself. She was coated in blood. It couldn't have all been hers. She hurried over to the door of the cabin and looked out. Nothing. There were no lights in the darkness. They weren't there—or weren't coming—yet. She stumbled over to the bathroom and flung the door open, pulling her clothes from the top half of her body. The pain ravaged every movement. She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror. Fuck. There was a bloody wound just across from her belly button. She took the flannel and washed it down. Just the smallest of touch stinging and stabbing at her. The wound let blood. It was deep, but not fatal, she hoped. She opened the cabinet above the sink. They'd packed a healthy first aid kit for the journey. Experience was everything. And now the whole thing lay there. She pulled out the gauze. Wrapped herself with bandage. Took painkillers. She did it all fast. She went back out into the cabin. The man hadn't moved.

He was dead.

She went to the drawers, dressed. T-shirt. Jumper. Different coat.

Then she went to the door. Check to make sure they weren't coming.

Pick up one of the empty backpacks. She took the travel first aid kit from by the door and dropped it in the bag. Got a jumper and pair of jeans from Don's drawers. Bagged. Knife. Second knife. Made sure she had the compass, the map.

She looked out the door.

Nothing.

It was all she could think of. She went out into the darkness and around the cabin to the woodpile. Sure enough there was an axe. She took it. Put her coat on and swung the backpack over her shoulder.

She headed for the treeline.

C H A P T E R 8

Inside the line of the trees, she headed back towards where she had seen Don. Once on the hill, the smell returned. She went up, towards the ridge. Not moving directly. In case they were coming in the other direction.

She had barely reached the top of the first hill when she heard something. Voices. There were people in the forest with her. Men. She stopped, crouched. Watched.

She could see torches. Two of them cutting through the black. They were moving in the direction of the cabin. She couldn't see if one of them had the gun. *Fuck*. Still. That meant that there was only one of them with Don.

It made it easier.

She just needed to get him out. Into the darkness. Then they could travel. Back towards the road. The men breached the top of the hill and started down the other side. Ang continued towards the ridge. Following the direction they had come from.

As she travelled, the smell of their fire became stronger. It helped her go in the right direction.

She reached the top of the ridge. Through the darkness she could see the fire. She wasn't far from where she was last time. If there were two of them with torches back there in the forest, then there should still be one of them at their camp. She couldn't see him. But behind the flames she *could* see Don. He wasn't in exactly the same place as before. He was a few feet away. That was a good sign, right? Ang moved slowly, down the ridge towards the fire. Watching. The other one had to be there somewhere.

She moved to the edge of the trees, hidden in the undergrowth. Closer. She could see Don. He was bound by something. He wasn't moving. She kept her hand over her mouth as she rested.

She could feel the blood from her gut wound seeping through the bandages. The movement was making it worse. That and the painkillers. They were a blood thinner. She knew that, but didn't have a choice. She could feel the sores on her feet from having not put her boots on properly when she'd come out looking for him the first time.

Damn it.

She waited for what felt like an eternity. Nothing. She *had* to go. Now or never. The missing man could have been anywhere. She took the axe firmly in her hand and moved slowly out of the cover. Rounding the small clearing, she stopped herself from rushing to Don. It was what she wanted, of course, but if there was a gunman watching—which there maybe—getting herself killed was going to help no one. And now she was out of the shadows, if he was watching, he would be able to see her.

She stayed as low as she could, whilst still being able to move comfortably. Round the fire. The weight of the backpack was heavy moving like that. The axe, unwieldy. She got to Don. He was half naked. They'd taken him when he was readying to shower. He wasn't wearing any trousers. Only had a light shirt on. Socks. He was wet from the mist, the ground. They'd bound him in *barbed fucking wire*. Twisting it around him, stopping him from trying to pull himself free. There was blood all over him from where he had struggled. Most of it was dried now, but the thorns were still dug into him. She reached forward, unsure if he was alive. Touching him, he was cold.

Like a corpse.

Ang breathed in quickly. A snap of breath as she felt his skin, clammy, wet. He felt like a washed up dolphin. Then he shuddered. She nearly let out a yelp, but stifled it to a gasp. "Hey," she whispered. "It's me." She was shaking uncontrollably. She touched him a second time and he moved his head. Only a little. The wire was wrapped around him from his arse to the top of his head, his arms tight down by his sides.

"Help me." He could barely speak, and as soon as he did, he began to shudder, as if she had awoken him.

Ang dropped the axe at her feet, and swung the backpack from her. She opened it and pulled out the bloody knife. She could see him staring at it in the light of the fire, but he didn't say anything. He barely moved. "You need to run," he said, as she started to saw at the thin metal bindings.

"Fuck off," she replied, without stopping.

"Ang, *baby*, get away." The words were weak. He was tired. Hurt.

"Fuck off," she said again.

"He's coming."

Ang stopped sawing. She looked at Don, his eyes fixated beyond her into the darkness. “I can see him,” he said. She turned and looked.

“Where?” she hissed.

“On the ridge.”

Ang looked harder in the blackness. Then she saw a movement. “Fuck,” she turned back to Don. His eyes were closed. “No,” she whispered. She reached out and touched his face. “Don.” His eyes flicked open. There was little behind them. She didn’t have much time. “Fuck it.” She picked up the axe by the head, and took the knife. She stayed low, getting to a crouch and hurrying into the darkness, in the opposite direction of the man coming in.

Hopefully he hadn’t seen her.

If he had, maybe he wasn’t the gunman.

She slid into the shadows, and beyond, getting deep into the darkness before turning. She looked back to Don. She couldn’t see him really, he was facing the other way, silhouetted by the fire. Beyond him and the fire was the man. He’d come from the bushes beyond and was standing there, looking down at Don, the fire … and *her backpack*. “Stupid fuck,” she muttered. The man didn’t have a gun. That was something. He was staring out, almost at her, like he knew she was there, but couldn’t see her.

Ang slipped the knife into the inside pocket of her jacket and held the axe with two hands. She moved slow, and deliberate.

The man reached inside his jacket, and pulled out a radio.

CHAPTER 9

He lifted the radio to his lips and pressed the button. But he didn't speak. He was staring into the darkness. Ang gripped the axe tighter. "There's someone here," he said.

It's her, came the voice from the radio. *We're at the cabin. Johnny's dead, Dave.*

"No names." He released the button on the radio and slipped it back into his pocket. "He's still alive," he called into the darkness. He was trying to draw her out. Must be. "You can come get him. We're not going to hurt you."

Ang felt like she'd heard that one before. She didn't move. Still as a cat.

He looked slowly from side to side. He didn't know where she was. He didn't know if she was watching him. But she couldn't move. He'd see her.

The man—Dave—he glanced down at Don. He took a step back and then kicked Don, hard. Don curled up, swallowing his foot into the folds of his body. He let out an audible groan. Then he flexed as the thorns of the wire cut into his body. He writhed as they dug deeper in him … more as he moved, an ouroboros snake of pain and movement. Eventually settling, still. He stopped, maybe blacked out. Ang closed her eyes. She wanted to look away. She wanted to turn but was frozen by Dave's look. His stare. "It's you," he called again. "It's you that's causing this."

Then he turned. He didn't know where she was at all. As soon as his back was to her and Don and the fire, she scampered to the side, across the blackness, to a tree that would cover her figure.

She felt like she was cowering. Hiding from the man. Fuck it. She was. He might still have that gun somewhere. She rounded the tree. He couldn't see her now. She was too deep. She glanced at Don. He was still alive. At least. *For now.*

The man turned again. He was almost spinning on the spot, watching for her to do something. Give herself away. He quickly crouched next to Don. Looked like he was making sure he was still alive. She watched. He put his hand out onto Don and he flinched away from him. She could tell by the movement that even the flinch hurt.

“He’s still alive.” He was louder than before. He stood and crossed the clearing he was in, small as it was. Trying to locate her. Ang gripped the axe. She had to do something. She strode, as quietly as she could, but as quickly as she could. She stalked through the darkness towards the light from the flames.

As she got closer, she could see Don struggling on the ground.

She came from the dark. The axe in her hand. She slid it into position, breaking into a run as she broke the cover of darkness, into the light of the fire.

Dave turned when he heard her. She was already swinging the axe. Up. It was over her head. She was going to chop the blade down on his head. She couldn’t think of a better way to come at him. He screamed. Surprise? Maybe. But she had both her hands on the handle of the axe. Both above her head. The weight of the axe behind her, below her head height. She couldn’t swing it before he was on her.

The two of them tussled. He grabbed her arms, her powerless to stop him, she released the axe and let it drop to the ground, mere feet from Don —unable to help. Dave was strong. He held her arms up. Grinned. A snarl. He was old. Older. Maybe nearly fifty. He had storks of white hair protruding from the beany hat he was wearing. Bushy eyebrows. Weirdly the thought crossed her mind that he needed to have them tamed. His teeth were yellowed. Once she was that close she could smell tobacco. Fucker stank of cigarettes. He leaned forward.

Kissed her.

Cunt.

She struggled to get from his grip, but he still had her arms held up above her head.

She felt his tongue try to probe into her mouth. She thought about letting him. Letting it into hers. Biting the fucking thing off. But she daren’t. The thought of it made her want to retch. Instead she pulled her head back. Butt the fucker in the face. He released her hands, seeing what she was about to do, raising his foot up. He kicked at her, but Ang dodged to the left. Pure instinct. Partly throwing herself to safety from the blow, partly dropping, weak. In pain. She rolled to the side, away from the fire and tried to drag herself quickly to her feet, but he was on her. He dropped

his weight on her, straddling her. His hand scrabbling to grab her arms. Ang pulled to the left and right, trying to get free. “Now, now,” he said. “You calm down.” He grinned, spit and drool leeching from his mouth and onto his lips, his chin. His face was so close to hers that his breath—white in the cold night—blustered across her face.

“Fuck you,” she replied. Ang glanced off to the side. Don was watching. Struggling. His face contorted in pain.

Dave started to pull at Ang’s clothes.

Fuck.

“No,” she cried, her voice desperate. She kicked out her legs, kneeing him in the back, making him straighten. Putting him off his rapey motherfucker stride. “Fuck you.” She kicked harder. The pain in her gut wrenched as she felt her wound move and tear. He let go of her with one hand. Tried to reach around behind himself. She punched at him. She could see him flinch with the blows. He could feel them.

Then she remembered. She reached up and pulled at the zip on her jacket. It drew his attention back to her. Like she was undressing for him. For his pleasure. His mouth pulled into a grin. Dirty cunt. She yanked the zip down enough to slip her hand into the warmth beneath. Slide her fingers around the hilt of the knife she had in there. He had stopped fighting her. He actually thought she was going to do something to please him.

Ang pulled the knife out, holding it reversed—it was the only way she could get her fingers around the hilt. She slashed it at him. It bounced along the outer of his jacket. Just a kitchen knife. It slid across the fabric, not even cutting it open.

The look on his face changed. It morphed from smug victory to fear.

Then anger.

He raised his hand up, and punched it down on her. On her torso. Middle of the chest. Flames of pain erupted across her body, slender and small in comparison to his. His weight above her. He pummelled. Once. Twice. Punching her in the chest. The air was gone in a second. The pain from her wound lashing out at her. She could feel the blood pumping harder, faster, out of her. He let go of her other hand and raised the two of them up together, balled. He was going to hammer the life out of her.

Ang slashed again. This time backhanded. Point of the blade first. She pushed herself forward. Tried to get the blade further into his body. She stabbed it into his jacket. It slipped in with too much ease for it to have gone into his flesh. He stopped and looked at her hand, holding the knife, stuck into the side of his jacket, missing the body. Frozen.

They glanced at each other.

Ang pulled the knife out, and Dave, forgetting that he was about to hit her, rolled to the side. Self-preservation kicking in. She was up. He was up.

Every inch of Ang hurt. Her feet to her chin. Thudding. She could feel the blood pumping around her body as she faced off against him. He was holding a pose like he was about to wrestle a bear. She was swinging the blade from side to side like she'd seen in the films, hoping it was enough to keep him back.

Don was motionless on the ground. The fight kicked out of him.

Her attention taken by him for the briefest second, Dave lunged. He knocked the knife to the side and threw a punch at her. Hit the side of her head. It was a flail. A panicked punch, but enough to knock her off her feet. There was a second of white flash. Pretty sparkles of pink and red crossed her vision.

She let the knife go and hit the wet ground hard. It knocked what little air she had in her, out. She blinked away the flashes. Tried to keep her bearings. Only seconds lost and she'd be dead.

Or worse.

She rolled onto her back.

Fucker was leaning down to pick up her blade.

She rolled again, around Don's side. Putting him between them. Up on her knees. The fire was there, next to her. Warm. She looked at him. Standing. He was weighing the knife. He was going to gut her. The thoughts of fucking her were gone.

"You could have had it easier than this," he said.

"Who the fuck are you?" she asked.

"My cabin, my rules," he responded.

What the fuck did that mean?

“I’m still gonna fuck you though.”

Great.

“Even if I have to kill you first.” He nodded down at Don. “I’m gonna make this one watch too. I might cut your eyes out and skull fuck you.” He looked down at the blade, admiring it. “This’ll be good for that.” He returned his look to Ang. “How does that sound?”

Ang kept her eyes on him, mostly. The occasion glance.

The axe.

It was on the other side of the fire to her.

C H A P T E R 1 0

"Great," she said, trying to keep him talking. "So, it's too late for me to stay alive for it?"

"Yeah." He smirked. He found this shit funny.

Ang glanced over to the axe. He didn't seem to notice. He stepped towards her. She flicked herself up from her knees to her feet. A small acrobatic movement that caused her a great deal of pain. "Fuck it," she whispered under her breath.

As soon as she was up, he rushed.

She rolled to the side, and dived over the lapping flames of the fire.

Landing hard on her shoulder, Ang rolled again, collapsing over the axe. She took it with both hands and stood. Dave stopped briefly. He was weighing up the chance him and knife stood over her and an axe. Him and the knife won out and he came at her again.

Ang side stepped, keeping as much of the fire between them as she could. Time to think. He started around the fire, and rather than turning the whole thing into a Benny Hill sketch, Ang raised the axe up and leapt over the fire towards him. The two of them collided and both lost balance.

Ang swung the axe at him. The thing was sharp. She hadn't thought to check but it impaled itself into his arm without too much issue, so there was that. Dave screamed in pain and fell to the side, yanking the axe out of her hands, as it fell with him. He dropped to the side, half falling on Don.

Don yelled out.

Ang leapt over to the two of them and gripped the axe again. She dragged the weight of it from Dave's arm, and swung it over her head. "Fuck this," she said. "Motherfucker." It was a bit of a shit quip, but it was all she could come up with at the time. She swung the axe down without any real sense of aim. The blade slammed into Dave's forehead, more dumb luck than judgement, splitting his head clean in half, the axe coming to a rest in the centre of his neck. His brains, and various amounts of different fluids spilled out over Don, still laying, unable to move, underneath him.

He made some strange noise. Don. Not Dave.

Ang yanked the axe out of him and swung it again. Hitting the same spot, give or take. This time the blade ploughed down into the man's chest.

It started to split him down the centre of his torso. Blood gushed from him, painting Don, Dave's clothes, and the wet ground around them in the liquid, black from the light of the fire. Again she pulled the axe out. Swung. Up. Down. In.

The blade stopped after it had punched it's way through Dave's sternum, the two halves of his body flopping—now unsupported—to the sides, and his guts flowing freely from within. His heart and lungs had been mashed, squished, and wrecked from the axe wounds, bone fragments flew and jumped as the blade moved. Bodily fluids drained out from him. Some dark, others light.

And the smell of the inside of a person plumed out from him. A cross between a boy's locker room and a badly ventilated butchers shop, rotting meat and all.

Ang lifted the blade again.

"Stop," Don muttered from somewhere beneath the blood and gore, grossness and fluids. "Help me," he said, weakly.

Ang dropped the axe to the ground. "Oh, God," she said. She stared at the viscous mess. "Baby." She reached down without thinking and tried to move Dave's corpse off Don. Bits of him were coming away in her hands, breaking off him. Handfuls of flesh detached from the sinews and muscles. She vomited. Couldn't help it. It just ran from her, burning her throat as it came up and out.

She didn't stop, dragging the wretched pile of flesh and meat from on top of Don, vomit running out of her mouth, onto her chin, her clothes.

She kicked the last of the corpse onto the dirt and quickly searched through the pile of flesh for the knife. Nowhere to be seen, she hurried to the backpack, pulling out the second knife she'd thrown in there. She knelt down next to Don and started to hack at the barbed wire.

"There's no time for that," he said. "Pull it off."

Ang wrapped her fingers around the wire and pulled it away from Don's bleeding body. Up close, she could see he had more than the damage from the wire. He'd been beaten. His face was cut, swollen, purple around the eyes. It looked like he had a broken nose. Crusts of blood sat on his face and chin. His hair was full of dried fluids. He had stab marks and gashes on his arms, bare in the cold night air.

He screamed, as she dragged the wire over him, pushing the thorns deeper into his flesh. More blood let from him. Fresh. Gooey. The warmth leaving him to harden on his skin. “Pull it down,” he said, weakly.

Ang couldn’t tell what blood was his. What was Dave’s. She cut her fingers open on the wire. The barbs tearing her skin as she pulled it from him. The three of their blood mixing to some gloopy mess of coagulant.

She dragged the last of the wire from his arms. He was reaching down to try and help, but he was overwrought with the pain, the loss of the blood. She pulled the wire from his body.

“Quickly,” he kept saying, over and over. She was moving as fast as she could.

Getting the last of the wire from him, Ang pushed it over to the side. She tossed the knife and Dave’s radio into the backpack and quickly swung it onto her shoulder. Then she bent down next to Don. He was barely conscious. “I need you to help me,” she said. “You need to get to your feet.”

Don nodded, weak. He lifted his arm and she put her head under it taking it over her shoulder. Then she pulled. He was mostly a dead weight. Nearly naked, she could feel his cold cutting through her clothes. He was probably completely numb. She thought that may be for the best in the circumstances. “Come on,” she said. She urged him forward. “We need to get away from the fire. They’ll be coming.” She helped Don from the light and towards the darkness. He could barely move. Couldn’t take his own weight. She was struggling trying to hold him up. She tried to encourage him, but knew they didn’t have much time.

Into the darkness, Don was fighting to stay upright. Not having anything on his feet was causing him to drop more weight on her time and again as he stood on things, tumbled. Stumbled.

They got into the trees, and Ang could tell that he wanted to stop. He wanted to drop. Probably give up.

She thought back to what she had just done. She wasn’t going to let him give up. Not after that.

She half dragged him away into the trees. Away from the ridge, away from the cabin. It was the wrong way. She knew that. She felt it. But it was the opposite way that the two of them would be coming, and that was the most important thing right now. Into the darkness, although she could

barely see, Ang managed to get Don over a hill and onto an incline. As soon as they couldn't be seen, she let him down.

Don slumped into the dirt, wet, mud. He was breathing hard, but shallow. Hypothermia. She dropped the backpack and pulled his clothes from it. Dry at least. She pulled the jacket onto him, the trousers over him. He was shaking uncontrollably, and falling in and out of consciousness. Shock. Blood loss. Extreme cold.

Ang wanted to fucking puke. There was nothing she could do to help him. Nothing more. Not now. She just hoped that he would be okay until—

"Fucking hell."

The voice came from behind them, towards the fire. The other two men must have returned. It was loud. Guy was pissed. Ang took a few steps towards the top of the incline and chanced a look over.

She could make out a small amount of the fire from that distance, with so much in the way. It *was* the two of them back. She could see movement. Torches. She ducked down and moved silently back to Don's side. He'd wrapped himself in a ball. Foetal. She could already see the blood stains appearing on his trousers. He looked like he blacked out. She took the knife from the backpack—wishing she'd picked up the axe—and the radio. She needed to gain some sort of control.

It was the only way she was going to save him.

She pushed the backpack up next to him and started back towards the cabin.

If the two of them were as pissed as they sounded, then she should be able to lure them back.

C H A P T E R 1 1

Ang used the torch on her phone with the map, compass, to make her way back to the clearing. Leaving their camp in the dark and heading out in the opposite direction, even a short way threw her internal directions off completely.

At the clearing, she made her way around the edge towards the cabin. They could have been heading back. They could have been searching the area. They might have found Don by now.

Either way, one of them was the gunman, and she wasn't about to get shot from a distance. *Cowardly fuckers*.

She reached the cabin and pulled out the radio. No idea how to use one of these things, but Dave just seemed to press a button and it worked. So she went with that. The radio let out a small crackle when she pressed the button. "You hear me?" she asked. She released the button and waited.

"Cowards," she said, again into the radio.

After a few seconds this time there was a response. "Where are you?" the voice asked.

He didn't have a northern accent like the other two. London maybe? Hard to tell down a radio. "Why?" she replied. She was more interested in where they were.

"Come on. Let's get together and talk this out. No one—else—needs to get hurt."

"Do I sound stupid?"

"No, but I kinda hoped."

"Fuck you, pal. Why don't you come and find me?" She opened the door of the cabin, confident at least that they wouldn't have beaten her back there. The warmth hit her in the face. Could only imagine how Don must be feeling out in the cold. She closed the door behind her. They were surely going to assume that she would either be heading back to the cabin, or going for the car.

"So where? Come on." He sounded like he was moving as he spoke. "Give me a clue."

Ang moved around the cabin turning the light sources off. If they were coming—and got to the clearing before she left the cabin—the last thing she needed was them seeing her moving about. She placed the radio on the table. She wouldn't have long. Grabbing the other backpack, she pushed in more clothes for her and Don. Warmest things. Jumpers. Things that would wrap. She went to the bathroom and pulled her clothes up in the mirror. The bandage was a bloody mess of dried and fresh blood. She looked at her face in the mirror. Pale. She was cold. Lost a lot of blood.

She took the rest of the bandages from the bathroom, tossing them into the backpack. Another knife in the kitchen. This was taking too long. She let the warmth of the fire creep into her legs for a moment as she stood there and thought. There was nothing else she needed there.

At the moment, fight or flight was rushing around her head like a road runner. Car? Fight? She couldn't get to the car with Don. No way. She couldn't leave him out there to fend for himself for the next twelve hours—more if she couldn't get a helicopter out. He'd die of cold.

It really didn't leave a choice.

She swung Don's backpack over her shoulder and quickly tightened her boots. She knew that when she took them off she was going to be cut to pieces in there. Her feet where going to blow up like balloons and she wouldn't be able to walk either.

She opened the cabin door carefully. Not that she could see much, but if they were in the middle of the clearing she *should* see them. If they were waiting at the treeline with the gun … Ang waited, and then threw the door open, running out, along the front of the cabin and around the side, into the darkness.

No gunfire.

She went from the cabin, straight into the woods and directly away from the ridge where they were coming from. It took her further away from Don, and the car, but at least they wouldn't be approaching from that direction, and they wouldn't expect her to be going that way, either.

She headed into the trees. Flat ground.

She could still see the cabin from inside the treeline. Just. The fire inside was enough to make the windows glow somewhat, and the moon was bright. She circled out slightly so that she could see the approach.

Then she waited.

They had to come to clearing. *Had to*. If they thought she was going straight to the car then she might not see them again. If they were on foot. Who knew what else might be out there, hidden away.

After only a few minutes, Ang saw them in the clearing. Two men. One gunman. One looked unarmed. She was sure that he wasn't though.

They approached the cabin carefully. Like she might still be in there. The one with the gun stayed a fair distance back, while the other went to the windows. He was checking in, the other aiming down the barrel. Looking for a shot.

He wasn't going to get one.

Bastard.

She watched as they skirted the whole building before deciding she wasn't in there. Then they entered. Turned the lights back on. She could see them—their shadows and silhouettes—moving about. They searched the cabin properly, then the lights went back out.

One of them exited. The gunman. He looked around the cabin, and then headed off in roughly the direction of the car. Not the exact path that the two of them had taken, but close enough for her to know that was where he was going. He walked across the clearing and into the trees.

Ang waited. What if it was a trap, and he was just waiting there for her? Waiting for her to come out of hiding and take his shot? She shook her head. There was no time for that sort of thinking. If that was what he was doing, then that would be the end of it.

Don was going to die, if Ang didn't act.

C H A P T E R 1 2

The minutes seemed to drag into forever as she waited. The lights stayed off in the cabin as he waited there for her. It didn't make sense to her that the gunman would also be in the trees watching. Not with the lights off in the cabin.

Ang waited until the gunman would be far enough away that some noise wouldn't alert him, but not too far away. She was still going to need to deal with him, one way or the other. She broke the cover of the treeline and approached the rear of the cabin. The shadows of the forest behind her, she knew that even if he was watching out of the window of the cabin, looking in her direction, the chance of her being seen was slim.

She came up on the wood pile at the back, staying low, once she was close to the cabin. Below the height of the windows. Daring only once to look through, from the window on the far side of the door. The room was orange lit from the fire, the flames not down to an ember. It meant that she could see little in the room.

She couldn't see the man.

Whoever he was.

He could be in the bathroom. Waiting. Watching. Shitting?

She continued around to the door of the cabin and waited there. There was no gunshot, and she kept as much of an eye on the clearing as the cabin itself in case he tried to return. She must have been in the clear. No shot. No incoming. She dropped the backpack from her shoulder and took out the knife from the kitchen.

She could see that the door to the cabin was unlocked—as they had left it, stupidly, on their first jaunt out. Only that morning.

It felt like an eternity ago.

She looked through the small window in the top of the door. She could see no one. Opening the door, just a crack, Ang watched for movement in the darkness of the room. She watched to see if he was going to jump out at her.

Nothing.

He must still be in there. She hadn't mistaken one man for two leaving? Ang rolled her fingers into a ball, a fist. She was suffering with severe heat

loss, bordering on hypothermia, herself. It was possible that her eyes—her mind—was playing tricks on her.

She opened the door further, holding the knife out in front of her. The smell of iron and copper jumped into her nose. She slid in through the door, low. Kept to the shadows and darkness created by the cabinets and shelving. Near the floor. Interloping into her own space. It was all she could think of to do.

Ang crouched, moving quietly around the edge of the room. Looking in all directions for the man. Nothing. She looked at the door to the bathroom, cracked open. There was a small light from within.

Fuck it. There he was. He had to be. She crossed the room towards the door, still low, but less cautious.

Then the lights in the cabin came on.

The whole room illuminated as the centre light switched on. Ang stood, shook. She spun around, seeing the man for the first time. He was sitting on the sofa, his hand on the light switch directly above it. She kept the knife up, pointed at him.

The other hand was on his radio. He pressed the button. "She's here," he said. She even heard it coming from the radio in her own pocket. The gunman could only have been gone fifteen minutes? Thirty minutes? She hadn't been paying that much attention. She just knew it was long enough. That was how long she now had before he got back. Now it seemed like it was never going to be enough time.

"Who are you?" she asked. She glanced around. He didn't seem to be armed. And he was a distance away. She was going to have to run at him. She wanted to get out now, though.

He looked around the cabin, a small smile on his face. "This is my place," he said. "Well, my family's, anyway. Me and my brothers."

"Brothers?" Ang swallowed.

"Brothers." He nodded. "Look, we all know what you've done. We all know what a …" he swallowed back some bile, grimacing, "… mess you made." He shrugged, his head bobbing from side to side. "We've always known the risks involved. So that wasn't a surprise, but you'll have to pay."

"I don't understand."

“I don’t understand,” he mocked her, copying her voice with a whine. “Of course not. We hire out the cabin. We take what we want. Most of the time we leave the people to think they’ve been robbed. Occasionally not.”

“You can’t get away with that,” she said.

“Oh, we can. Own a second cabin,” he said. “One that has a different set of directions. When anyone asks, the people who rented the cabin didn’t show up, and that’s the end of it. I think the police are starting to think there’s a serial killer on the loose.”

“Why us?” Ang kept one eye on the door. She had to get out. “Why didn’t you just rob us?”

The man let his tongue slid across his lips. Fat and bulbous. Disgusting. “You.”

“Me?” She had a shake in her voice she didn’t expect to come out.

He nodded. “Lovely little you.”

“What about me?” She wanted him to say it. She knew what it was going to be, but she wanted him to admit it.

“We wanted you to sing for us.”

What?

“What?”

“Then we were going to fuck you.”

There it was.

“Then we were going to eat you.”

What?

“Fuck,” she said.

“Yes. So anyway …” He swung his legs from the sofa and stood. He was still half a cabin away. He looked at the man on the floor, by the sink. Dead. “Poor fuckers,” he said. He actually did look sad. Then his eyes came back to her. “So, yes. Inbred redneck cannibal types. Surprise.” He did jazz hands. “And you thought they only lived in Florida.”

“Eat shit and die,” she said. The statement even brought a frown to her own face.

He snorted. “Quite.”

Ang continued to wave the knife from side to side. She slowly approached him. She had to do this. *Now*. She stepped on the rug in the middle of the floor and he moved to greet her.

CHAPTER 13

"Fucker," she muttered.

He smiled at the taunt. *Yes*, it said to her. *Yes, he was*. He tossed his radio over to the sofa, and it bounced off harmlessly, rolling to a stop on the cushion. Then he reached into his jacket, pulling his own knife out. It was larger than hers. A hunting knife of some sort. It had blood clearly caked on it. Don's. "So it's a knife fight you're after, is it?"

Not really. Ang had no idea how to fight someone with a knife. None at all. She waved the kitchen knife from side to side, and he seemed to follow suit, although his movements seemed far more deliberate than hers. Ang realised that she was out of her depth, and getting herself fucked up now was going to be the end of it.

That, and it crossed her mind that throughout all of this, she was probably slowly bleeding out, anyway. "Wait," she said. "You want to fuck me first? Then you're not going to kill me, are you?" She stood a little straighter, trying to play for time. It was a tough balancing act, between running out of time before the gunman returned, and not actually starting a knife fight she was sure to lose.

"Make's no difference to me what order we do things in," he replied.

Fuck.

He lunged at her. He was quick. Quicker than her. She tried to slide out of the way, the sheer speed at which he got from one place to another blindsiding her. She lurched to the side, took a slash to the arm. It barely went through her jacket, but it did, and it cut into her flesh, too. Not only was he quick, but his knife was fucking sharper than hers. "Bollocks," she announced. He grinned.

The two of them circled.

She had her back to the door now. Ang thought about fleeing, but he was quick. She'd be impaled on the blade before she got outside. And that wasn't the last thing he wanted to impale her with. She glanced down at Dave's corpse. The hot wet mess had started to dry out on the floor now.

Then he lunged again. This time he was even quicker. On her. Knife in the arm. Dug straight in. She screamed. He'd stabbed her so the blade went all the way through and came out the other side. "Cock," she shouted. In the

panic, she flailed, the knife she held being knocked from her hand. She heard it clatter to the floor, but didn't see where it went. He pulled his knife out of her, but he was everywhere. She never stood a chance. He had his hand over her mouth. He had something wrapped around her.

The two of them were falling.

They landed. He was on top. His whole weight dropping onto her. Knocking the wind out of her. She felt like he'd broken her ribs. The pain from the wound in her gut flared like fire, and she cracked her head hard on the floor. She made a sound like a baby cow as she tried to breathe in. She tried to scrabble out from under him, but he wasn't perturbed in the slightest. He wasn't hurt. Winded. He was pulling at her clothes, trying to pull them up.

Fucker was enjoying it. Just like his cunt brother.

She didn't have much time. The gunman was her first thought. Then this one. He was going to fuck her. Clearly. Ang reached around the floor beside her, trying to find a weapon. The knife. It had to be there somewhere. She moved one hand fast, her fingers slapping the floor as he busied himself with his pants.

Fucking hell.

Her other arm, she could barely move. It felt like every time she moved someone was yanking her muscles, pulling them from the bones. He was up, on his knees, still straddling across her. He had his belt undone. His jeans unbuttoned.

Ang could see her blood on his clothes from where he'd fallen on her.

She looked around. Where the fuck was his knife? He'd pulled it from within his coat. He must have stashed it back. She reached up with her right arm, her left laying on the floor, bleeding. Like so much of her now. She pushed her hand into the folds of his coat. He didn't even grasp what she was doing.

Still getting his cock out.

She moved her hand to the left. Nothing. Then the right.

There.

There was weight hanging in his jacket. It was the knife, held in some sort of holster at the shoulder, like a gun.

He got his jeans open. He was already hard. Ready to do as he threatened. *Promised*.

Ang grabbed the knife and pulled against it. It didn't move.

He then realised what she was doing. He laughed. She yanked at it again, but it must have been strapped in or something. He got up on his knees and pulled down his jeans. His cock coming free. Then he slid slightly down her body and started to remove her trousers.

Time's up.

She sat up, hard and fast. She knew it was going to hurt. Everything fucking hurt. She had good, solid, stomach muscles before all this, so she reckoned she could still do a sit up in an emergency, even with a couple of stab wounds. Her forehead collided with his and the two of them grunted. He was big. Strong. He didn't collapse backwards, or even move from where he was, straddled across her thighs. His cock didn't even waver. The two of them sat there for a second staring at each other, while he rolled his jaw around. Then he spat blood into her face. Bitten his tongue or something.

He suddenly started up, his phallus waving around in her face, as she sat there, pinned.

He was getting ready to rape her.

Ang had brought her wounded arm up when she'd sat. Used it to unhook the strap holding the knife in the holster. She'd used her good her hand to pull it out, and was holding it between them when he'd spat in her face. He hadn't even noticed. She smiled through the blood. And jammed the blade forward.

It wasn't hard. She didn't have the leverage to get any weight behind it. Nor the movement to even know what angle the blade was facing, really. But it slipped in like fucking butter.

He lurched back, away from her like a child that had burned itself on something it didn't know was hot. She kept hold of the knife as he scooted backwards, a little shocked herself at how fast he moved.

He got quickly to his feet.

If she'd been watching this—some sort of late night horror movie experience—she probably would have laughed at the absurdity. Fucking

dick out. Looking like a scolded cat. He just looked pissed off at her stabbing him. Which, she supposed, wasn't a good sign. She glanced at the blade. The fresh blood was only an inch down the blade. Shit. She hadn't stuck him deeply.

Ang focussed on getting from the floor. She wanted to do it with speed and grace—to show him she was a threat—but more and more, everything was becoming blindingly painful. The warmth of the cabin had freed her from her numbness, feeling returning to every inch of her body. She felt like she'd been beaten by several men, on several occasions. Which she had.

Her thoughts quickly turned to Don.

Then she pulled herself to her feet. A grimace sought out her face, but nothing more. She didn't give the cunt the satisfaction of knowing how much pain she was really in.

Then they faced each other.

CHAPTER 14

He smiled. His teeth were a bloody mess. The gore ran down his chin. His cock still protruded from below his waist. She had expected him to go flaccid, but apparently this shit turned him on. *Crikey*. She held the knife out, not bothering to wave it from side to side, to try and intimidate. There seemed little point, and she was exhausted, frankly. "Come on then," she said, quietly.

He reached down and cupped where she'd stabbed him—all be it, weakly—then brought his hand up to look at the blood. "You little bitch," he said.

Well, she wasn't going down without a fight.

He glanced around, looking for a weapon. Knowing how badly hurt she was, Ang felt that she would probably lose if he rushed her, but it appeared that *he* didn't know that. He reached down into the fire behind him. A swift motion, too quick for Ang to run at him. He returned to standing with a log. He'd grabbed one that was glowing red on one end, and apparently cold on the other.

It made him look like a Neanderthal.

More like a Neanderthal.

Brought a smile to her face. Fucking inbred. She launched herself at him, blade pulled in near her stomach, facing out towards him. He raised the club he'd grabbed at her as she did. As Ang got closer she extended her arm, thrusting the blade towards him in double time. He landed the club onto her shoulder. The pain exploded through her, but the momentum she had won out.

The blade, lowered by the blow, drifted down from stabbing into his gut as she intended, and drove into the top of his leg instead. The man wailed out like a screaming baby. The two of them toppled again.

He relinquished his club—not out of choice—but Ang held the blade. As the two of them scrabbled on the floor, she didn't let go of the hilt, twisting it and turning it, wherever it was stuck. He kept screaming out.

Good.

Cunt.

She got to her knees, still holding the blade. He was laying on the floor. Legs spread. Cock was finally starting to wane. She looked down. Probably not enough blood pumping around his body to sustain it. She'd hit a main artery in the leg. Blood was gushing out of it like a water main. He was going to be dead in moments. *Ha*. She pulled the knife out and it geysered upwards like a god damned fountain. A smile on her lips, she swung the hunting knife at his half-masted cock and sliced the top off without trying. He screamed louder.

Ang got to her knees, between his legs. The blood sprayed over her, slowing as his heart slowed, the pressure dropping. It was warm, at least.

"I cut your dick off," she said. She brought the blade up like a sacrificial knife and stabbed it down into his gut. He lay there helpless. Watching through wide eyes. He grunted, silenced by the blade as it dug into his flesh. She pulled it out. Stuck it in. Third times a charm. Out. In. Again. Again.

Again.

Fuck you. You rapist motherfucker.

He stopped moving. Ang was painted in his blood. She wiped her face with the back of her arm, her coat smooshing his blood around. There was too much to wipe off. She looked quickly to the door. Still closed. The gunman. He had to be close.

Ang pushed herself to her feet, wobbly. She looked at the bloody mess on the floor. And smiled. Happy that there was only one of them left. But without time to stop and smell the roses. The iron. Copper. Death.

She hurried over to the bathroom, light headed. She was starting to feel woozy. Partially from the continued exertion. Partially the blood loss. She looked herself in the mirror. Fuck. She was painted red. Her face. Hair. Clothes. She pulled her arms out of her jacket and dropped it to the floor. The stark lines painted between the blood and her clothes making her look like an art exhibit that had masking tape on it. She washed the blood around the knife wound in her arm. It was fucked. Deep. Still bleeding. She grabbed the hand towel off the bath and wrapped it around it. There was the first aid kit in the backpack. Outside. No time. Ang pulled her shirt up and examined the bloody mess that was the knife wound in her stomach. It would have to do. Still bloody with fresh leakage. At least the bandages

were still in place. She pulled her clothes down and splashed her face with the warm water from the tap.

At least that was something.

She stood.

She could smell something.

Ang stuck her head out of the door of the bathroom. Smoke. The room was burning. She looked over to the rug. His stupid replacement club had rolled over onto the rug and set the fucking thing on fire.

For. Fuck's. Sake.

Ang stumbled out of the bathroom. She looked at the fire. Hurried over and tried to stamp it out, but it had taken too much hold. Fuck. She went to the fridge and pulled the door open. Grabbed the first liquid she saw—milk—and went to the door. Grabbed the last coat off the rack. The dry spare. Pulled it on over her bloody clothes. She pulled the door open and stepped out. As she bent down to pick up the backpack she heard a loud crack. Then the wood of the door splintered above her head.

"Shit," She wailed.

Gunfire.

She grabbed the backpack—with her split open arm—and dragged it away to the side. Running along the front of the cabin. Another crack of the rifle. She didn't hear that one land. Probably dug into the cabin wall somewhere.

Then she was around the side of the cabin. She stopped, leaning against it. Deep breath. She dropped the milk into the backpack and swung the thing onto her good shoulder, running off into the trees behind the cabin.

CHAPTER 15

Even as she circled in the trees, around the clearing, she could see the cabin burn. It had taken a hold inside long before the gunman had gotten to it. She could see him standing in silhouette against the fire as it licked up the walls of the building.

If everything she'd been told was true, then he'd know by now that his family was dead.

Good. The thought warmed her more than her blood—or lack of—did. She kept moving. The movement was probably the only thing keeping hypothermia from taking her. She followed the trees. She had an idea where the ridge was. Kept moving.

As soon as she headed onto the hill, going towards the ridge, she lost sight of the gunman. He could be anywhere. Following. She couldn't hide. Not all night. Not with Don.

They'd both freeze or bleed out for sure.

She found the ridge after a few minutes. Fifteen maybe. She was trying to keep a pace faster than walking, but she kept stumbling.

At the ridge, she saw their fire, still burning. It was so enticing. She just wanted to go to the fire and drop. Rest. Warm herself.

Instead, she rounded it, keeping to the darkness. If the gunmen made good stride—and he wasn't injured, so he could—he might already be overlooking it. Waiting for her. Getting to the other side of their small clearing, she headed into the trees and over the rise to the incline she'd left Don on. She came over the top, and as soon as she was out of the line of sight of anyone overlooking the fire, she pulled her phone from her pocket and switched the torch on.

She shone the light on the ground and quickly found Don. He was still laying huddled by the bag. It didn't look like he'd moved since she left him. Ang crouched down next to him. "Hey," she said, quietly. "Baby. Wake up."

He didn't move.

She knew. In her heart she knew. But her brain didn't give up. She reached down and stroked his face. Cold and hard. "Baby," she said again. "Baby." Her words were getting quieter. She rested her hand on his forehead. Ice cold. She let out a whimper as everything that had happened

over the past few hours caught up to her. The tears came. Warm on her face. Salty on her lips. She held his corpse in her arms for a few minutes as she cried. Saying her goodbye to him. Her apologies for not being there. Not saving him. She rocked back and forth.

But she was quiet.

She knew the gunman was still out there.

Ang lay Don back down. Turning him over to face away from her. She couldn't see him. Not now. Not yet.

She pulled her coat off, took the first aid kit from the backpack and started to bandage herself. She took painkillers with the milk. Dressed herself in all the warming clothes she could find between the backpacks and her clothes.

Even Dons.

She took her boots off. Dressed her beaten feet with plasters, gauze. Put her boots back on. Tying them off, properly. The radio crackled to life, breaking the silence of the night. "I'm going to kill you."

Ang pulled it from her jacket and stared at it for a second. She pressed the button. Thought again, and the let it go. She dropped it into the wet mud, and went to Don's lifeless body. "I'll be back, baby," she said. She kissed her fingers and then touched them against his skin.

Pulling the knife from the backpack, Ang carefully packed everything else square away, and did the pack up. She leaned it against Don so that she could see it from a distance. She didn't know how lucky she would be finding him again. Then she pocketed her phone, and took his, slipping that one into her jacket. Having two torches couldn't hurt. She left Don's body and kept low, heading back to the ridge.

Ang watched the fire in their camp for a few minutes. She didn't see any sign of the gunman. He could be anywhere. Going into the light was a risk, sure, but other than staying out all night, what choice did she have? Even with the map and compass, she could only head back to the car, and he would surely be waiting for her somewhere on the way.

So she would fight.

Keeping in the black of the trees, Ang made her way in a circle around the camp. She didn't see him in the hour it took. She moved slow. As silently as she could. As far back from the fire as she could and still see it. That would be where he was *if* he was watching. At the highest point. Facing the fire. Ready to shoot.

Once she was sure that he wasn't there, she weaved a non-regular route down towards the dying fire. She didn't want to be an easy target if she *had* missed him. She reached the edge of the treeline and waited.

She was waiting for the gunshot.

She was waiting for him to better her.

She didn't know why. But it was what she expected. It was probably blood loss. The cold. Exhaustion. But she wasn't going to give up. She left the safety of the dark, closing her eyes and stepping out into the last of the light of the fire. Nothing. No crack. No shot. She opened her eyes, half expecting him to be standing there in front of her, but no.

Ang went to the body by the fire. The heat had started to cook him and his gore. The blood, spilled near the flames looked like black pudding. His insides—whatever the fuck it was that had spewed from him when she cleft him in two—were changing colour. Some of it like meat in the clear packet in the supermarkets when it was turning bad. Going from red to silvery purple. Other parts looked like they'd been sitting in the frying pan for a few minutes. The smell was rotten. The stank of iron and copper had given way to the cooking of human flesh.

Some of it had been disturbed, too.

A wolf, perhaps, brave enough to approach the fire. Chowing down on half cooked human meat. *Nice*. She crouched, stifling the retch that came from her, as vomit tried once again to breach her. She picked up the axe in her bare hands. The blood gluing the hilt to her like some organic Velcro. She looked around into the black of the trees.

He obviously wasn't watching.

Then she made off into the darkness.

CHAPTER 16

Ang made her way back to the clearing. He had to be there. He'd threatened to kill her. Unless he was going to the car. Unlikely. She watched the cabin burn. His silhouette carved into her memory. Standing there watching. He was in the treeline now. Somewhere. Waiting. He had to be.

Ang started on the same circle as before. Around the edge of the clearing, as if she was going back to the cabin without walking straight across. He was smart—maybe that was the wrong word—*experienced* in this sort of thing. He would be on high ground. Low. He would want to keep the cabin in view, but he wouldn't be so stupid as to assume she would go to it. Just that she would come back here to find her way back to the car.

She used that to work her way around the clearing. She stayed high. Too far back to see to see the cabin comfortably. Behind where he would be. She had to find him first.

Within the hour, Ang had made her way nearly half way around the clearing. She was moving at a snail's pace. It was the only way to be sure. That was when she saw it. She was deep in the trees, facing the cabin, when the smallest glint of light drew her attention to the undergrowth. She froze. Terrified. Every emotion she had felt, or been too afraid to feel, in the last twelve hours fought for supremacy inside her. She wanted to charge him. She wanted to run. Flee. Vomit. She started to shake uncontrollably.

Drawing in breath, she gripped the axe tightly. She walked towards the glint of light slowly. As she got closer she could see. The gun. It was protruding from the bushes. She could see his back in the dirt. He was laying there. Still as the night. Waiting. It was only blind luck that she had seen him.

Looking out towards the cabin, she was right. He was in the perfect position to see everything. Any direction she was likely to take to return to the car. Ang moved slow. Silent. She brought the axe up, over her head, making sure not to catch it on any branches. Lay it in his back. Right in the centre.

She got close enough. He hadn't moved, so he hadn't seen her. She brought the axe up, over her head hard. Slamming it into the prone figure on the ground. It slammed into him. He still didn't move. The axe blade stopped with a deafening thud.

Something was wrong.

It didn't *feel* right.

And then he came from above. From the tree she had just come around. He landed on her, the two of them crashing to the side, into the dirt. Ang rolled to away, stopped by something hard. Something that hurt. She reached up to her head, to the rock she'd rolled into. "Fuck it," she muttered. Stupid. She scrabbled to her hands and knees. Plunged into the darkness of the undergrowth, she couldn't see him.

"Cunt," he barked.

There he was.

Ang felt a sharp pain on the side of her head. She rocked on her knees, and rolled over onto her side. Flashing bright white lights flickered on and off in her head. She felt like her brain had been mashed. A dull humming rose in her left ear. "Fucking hell," she muttered. Her voice didn't sound right.

Then she was moving. Motherfucker was picking her up. Had his hands under her arms and was dragging her out of the bushes. In the moonlight. "Let's see what we have here, then," he said. His accent was strong. He dumped her down, and she rolled onto her back. She could make out his shape above her. He was standing there like a fucking schoolteacher judging her. "Nothing to you," he said. Ang reached up and felt the side of her head. Warm. Sticky. He moved. Another pain in her head. He'd punched her.

Maybe.

She could feel blood in her mouth. It was dripping down into her throat and choking her. *No*, she thought. She didn't want it to end like this. She tried to roll to the side, and he put his boot down on her shoulder. The stab wound in her arm screamed.

She screamed.

The pain launched through her like nothing she'd ever felt. Not even when the fucker had stabbed her. She reached into her jacket with her good hand and pulled the last kitchen knife out. The one she'd taken from the cabin. She stabbed it at his leg, and he moved away, although she didn't think she'd hurt him.

He was laughing. “You silly little girl,” he taunted.

Ang rolled weakly to her knees again, she had the knife up, pointing at him. He let her. He made no attempt to stop her from getting up. He could see how beaten she was. How frail. She got to her feet, barely able to stand. She could feel the blood running down the inside of the jacket arm. Another wound opened up. He was grinning.

Sadistic cunt.

She thrust at him. Trying to land the blade in him. Somewhere. Anywhere. She didn’t really care at that point. She was struggling to see straight. He brushed her away. Knocking her to the side and she lost her footing, falling again into the brush and growth at the bottom of the trees. She stopped. Trying to get air back into her lungs. Everything hurt. She tried to move, but the tanks were empty. Running on fumes. She rolled to the side. She was on something. There were branches all around her. She felt the axe. It was under her arse. She was too tired to leap to her feet and grab it. Swing it about. Cut the fucker up. And he was just standing there. It was like he couldn’t decide what to do with her.

“I thought you’d be harder than this,” he said.

Ang rolled her head to the side. Something was sticking out from under her good shoulder. It was hard to see it in the dark.

It was his hunting rifle.

Ang looked at him. He wasn’t even paying attention. *This war was won*. She let the smallest of snorts come from her bloody nose. A blood bubble appeared, and then popped. Ang rolled to the side and grabbed the gun. She slid, slipped, the gun in hand as her weight pulled her on the hill, on the leaves in the mud. She was laying, rifle in hand. Facing him.

Suddenly he was paying attention. He had his hands up, passively forward. Surrendering. *No*, his body was saying. *I’m not going to hurt you*.

“Och aye the noo, Motherfucker,” she said. She closed her eyes and prayed, as she pulled the trigger.

She’d never fired a gun before. Not outside of Call of Duty and even that was some time in the past, after everyone start using aimbots. Either way, the kick from the rifle was surprising. It moved her on the dirt, sliding her along a little. He fell backwards. She saw him disappear into the darkness and out of sight.

Ang lay there for a minute. She was waiting for him to get back up. Smile still there and taunting her that she'd missed.

But she hadn't. She knew that as soon as he stayed down.

Ang dropped the rifle down beside her, she felt around for something to help pull herself up. Scrabbling up a tree, she got to her feet, and picked the rifle back up. She wobbled over to him, laying on the floor. He was holding his gut. A rifle wound, at this range, was apparently enough to make someone's guts explode outwards.

She looked up. The foliage around her was dripping in his blood. He was weezing. Stuggling to draw the air in. Crouching she could see why. Well, she could see his lungs. The rifle had made a whole the size of a dinner plate in his stomach and lower chest.

He looked surprised.

He reached out as what was left of his life dripped out, pooling onto the mud. He was asking her for help. For warmth. Compassion.

"Fuck you, Jock," she said quietly. "Fuck you."

Ang dragged herself back to stand and dropped the rifle down into the leaves. He wasn't going for it. That was for sure. She picked up the axe.

Dragging it behind her, she started up the hill. Back to Don. She needed to get the backpack, before she could start back towards the car.

The End

I T C H

A Novella

Ash Ericmore

C H A P T E R 1

You have to be kidding me. Bobby wanted to fuck. For fuck's sake. *Wait*. That didn't come out right. He usually only wanted it every few weeks these days. Janie sat on the edge of the bed listening to the sound of the shower. At least that was thoughtful of him. To wash first. Fuck. Well. Never mind. She'd thought that the new Playstation coming out would deter him for a few days. Maybe even a week. Especially if one of those war game duty things was on the release schedule. MMOGTFO's or whatever.

But no. He wanted to fuck.

She pulled the collar of her t-shirt away from her skin and looked down the inside. She didn't want to. Not really. Not like she *used* to want to. Especially not having just puked a little while ago. *Again*. She was beginning to think she was coming down with something. She looked at the door. She should run for it. Don't give him the satisfaction. But he'd only follow her. She should leave him. Tell him that she didn't want him anymore. But he'd only follow her. Like he always did.

That one time. The time she'd met a guy call Alfie—stupid fucking name, mind—down the pub on her lunch break from work. He was nice. Sweet. He didn't talk down to her. He didn't treat her like she was a second hand citizen in her own home. She'd agreed to meet up with him the next day, same time, same pub. Three days (dates if you will) into that friendship, and Bobby had turned up. One of his mates must have seen her talking to this simple, harmless dude. The two of them had been sitting at one of the tables in the corner and Bobby had walked in and grabbed a pool cue from the stand by the table.

Neither of them had seen him coming. Wrapped up in each other's company, she supposed.

Anyway. Bobby did what Bobby did. He brought the thick end of the cue down on the back of Alfie's shoulders. Hurt, you see. Really fucking hurt. He was good at that sort of thing. It didn't so much as scratch the cue. It left no visible marks on the face. But it felt like someone had stabbed you in the back. It took your breath completely away. Stole it, refusing to give it back. Bruised the bones. But they were solid bones back there. It didn't break anything. It just made it impossible to sit back for a week. You

couldn't lay on your back because it hurt so much. And that was the point. It was a warning.

He'd done to Janie once. That was how she knew.

Anyway. She never saw Alfie again. Which was the point, she supposed.

She wished she was with Alfie now, wherever he was. She had tried going back to the pub again. Even after work. She asked at the bar. They said they thought they knew who she was talking about, but they hadn't seen him for a few days … then weeks, before she gave up.

The shower stopped.

Oh well. Janie shuffled her bum back up the bed, until she was sitting in the middle of it, her back against the headboard. She should make it nice for him. Then he'd finish quicker. She heard the door to the bathroom open and the padding of his feet. He came straight to the bedroom. Knew she'd be there. He just had a towel wrapped around his waist. Wasn't even properly dried. He smiled at her, but didn't speak. Flipped the radio on. It was stood on a bar stool in the corner of the bedroom. Bare white painted walls. Cord carpet. Bar stool for bedroom furniture. It was amazing what you thought about at times like that. *When Bobby was preparing*.

The news played on the radio. *The farm has been quarantined following further investigation*, it said. That sounded interesting, but Bobby flicked the switch to play a CD. It autoplayed the one in there. She didn't know what it was, but it was loud guitars and heavy drums. The sort of music where you couldn't understand the vocalist (if you could call him that) as he screamed like he was vomiting into the microphone.

Bobby waited for the music to start. He bopped his head forward a few times, and strode into the middle of the room like he owned the place. She paid the fucking rent. He dropped the towel. Luckily his cock wasn't particularly big so he didn't hurt her with it.

Although she screamed sometimes.

He liked that.

It was already at half-mast. She made cooing sounds and he approached the bed. She pulled her skirt up over her waist. She wasn't wearing any knickers. Spread her legs. Hopefully she could get this done with a quickie. "I want you to fuck me," she said. "Now. Do it now." His cock got harder.

Thank fuck for that.

He got on the bed and crawled up to her. He jammed his fucking fingers at her, banging around, not knowing what he was doing. Not caring. He wanted to finger fuck her first, and didn't care what she wanted. Or felt. She let out a little yelp as he prodded her once too often, not only failing to finding the target, but not concerned with whether she had any sort of lubrication or not. She took his hand and guided him in the right direction. She knew not to try and dissuade him. It would hurt less that way.

But as soon as she tried to help, he tired of the idea, and got up on his knees. Cock waving at her. "Suck me," he said.

Okay. She could do that.

C H A P T E R 2

Janie lay on her front with her face buried in the pillow. He'd only decided in the end he did actually want to fuck her. Fucking hell. He was at it now. Ploughing—she was sure he would say—the shit out of her. In all fairness, she could feel him. But wasn't exactly feeling *the plough*. He was grunting away—all of ninety seconds into his athletic bout of astonishing love-making—and about to cum.

She felt him when he did. Wasn't wearing a johnny, of course. He wanted to say that he liked to go commando to his friends, but in all truth, by the time she'd put the thing on him, he was usually pretty close to finishing. So that went out the window.

He rolled off her and onto the bed next to her. He was huffing away like he'd run a fucking marathon. Fucker. "That was great," she said, rolling out of the damp spot. She pulled her skirt down, re-dressing in record time. He was completely naked. He wiped his dick on the sheets. Nice. He didn't even say he'd had a nice time. Nothing. Janie stared at the ceiling in thought. He had rather seemed to have gone off it these days. Maybe it was her? Maybe he was growing out of her? Fat fucking chance.

He sat up, swung his legs off the bed and went over to the pile of clothes by the wall. He pulled out a pair of boxer shorts—that weren't clean when he tossed them down there—and pulled them on. She resisted asking if he was going to bother to shower. Because he wasn't. Not twice in one day. Then he left the room without saying a word to her.

She waited there, listening. She wanted to know what he was up to before she decided on her next move. He slammed the door to the living room and she heard the Playstation fire up. Then she could hear him, almost immediately. Talking to someone on chat. He was saying he'd just scored with his hot girlfriend. She would do him if he told her to, too. *Cunt*. She got up from the bed and went to the window leaning out onto the sill.

Their bedroom window overlooked the street, there was the small garden below that belonged to the flat downstairs, then an iron fence that butted up on the path. The road was usually pretty busy. It was the main road out of this dump of a town. She watched someone cycle by, gently. It looked relaxing. She watched an older gentleman walking the pavement. A couple of cars go by. It was warm. Sometime during the week. The days all

blended into each other when she wasn't at work. And a week off meant a week in the flat being pawed at by *him*.

Oh, if only the Playstation had done its job.

She watched as a man, maybe in his forties was walking along the other side of the street. He was pale. Sweaty like he'd been jogging, but he was wearing a suit. He stopped and held onto the wall for a moment, before he looked around and noticed her. She smiled at him. A quick, neighbourly affair. Just being nice. He smiled back and straightened himself. The gesture of someone who didn't want to look sickly in front of a potential mate. Then he walked towards her. Out into the road.

There was the squeal of some brakes and a car hit him. Janie was no good at cars. It was like a Mondeo, but not. Blue. Four doors. Not that she needed to know, because the car did at least stop. Well, it had to, what with the windscreen being obstructed.

The not-Mondeo was probably doing more than the speed limit. Most cars along there did. It hit the suited man low on his legs, and slid him up onto the bonnet. The impact had probably broken his legs. His whole body twisted, before going limp, just as his head hit the windscreen.

There didn't look to be much damage to his actual head, from where Janie was watching from, but by the amount of blood that sploshed across the glass, his head must have popped open like a condom full of water being tossed around. Like a water balloon. She screamed. Of course she did. She left the window and ran across the flat, through the hallway and out the front door onto the landing shouting *accident*. Bobby didn't even call out to find out what the problem was. Just shooting the people in the game.

She bounded down the stairs, and out the front of the building. There was a small gathering already. She burst through the gates, and to the side of the car. Janie put her hand over her mouth. The man's leg were mangled. Bone was jutting out of the leg of his charcoal suit somewhere near where his knee should have been. Blood was pumping from his trousers, out onto the body of the car, the blood looking black on the blue paintwork. She couldn't turn away from him, as much as she wanted to. His body was twisted at an angle that suggested his internal organs were arse about face now, and his head was dented like the bumper of the car was. As Janie's gaze moved up his body, she realised he was staring back at her, one eye misted out and white. And in there, somewhere, was a small spark of life.

He wasn't dead.

The people around her were at a hush, and no one was acknowledging that he was still there, in more than just spirit. Fuck. She needed to do something.

Then he moved.

That fucking woke everyone else up.

There was shuffling and screaming. *Oh my God*, they were saying, *somebody help him*. But Janie watched him move. He was pulling his arm down from above his head, twisted, his wrist corkscrewed around. Shards of glass from the windscreen jabbed into it, sticking out, blood weeping from the wounds. He slid it down to beside his body. The crowd all made noises, but no one approached him. They all stood and stared like a deer, watching a car coming towards them. His hand flopped loose from the wrist, nerve endings slashed. Bones shattered.

And still he maintain eye contact with Janie.

His hand, blood streaked and broken, wobbled at the end of his arm, as he pushed it down to the waist of his trousers. He used his thumb to hook into them, and pulled his trousers away from his body, slipping his hand into them. Into his trousers.

He doesn't know what he's doing, one of the crowd said.

Janie could see him, moving. See the lump in his trousers as he started to move back and forth. Still staring at her. Broken. Bleeding. She took a step back. Some silly bitch screamed. Why should she care? The fucker was staring at her, at Janie. No one else. Bleeding out, and still pleasuring himself over her. She was suddenly more than aware that she wasn't wearing any knickers.

She still had dried—drying—spunk on her legs.

Jesus fucking Christ, no.

As she stepped back, the crowd closed the gap between her and the car, like Moses letting the waves return. Then she couldn't see him. He couldn't see her. She heard someone ask, *what's he doing?*

Having a wank. That's what he was doing. It was what he wanted to do. On his deathbed. Deathcar. Whatever. While looking at *her*.

C H A P T E R 3

Janie left the scene of the crash, walking down the road, away from it. She didn't want to go back into the flat. To Bobby. She wanted to walk. It was a nice enough day, besides. Bare armed, wearing only a pair of flip flops she started down the path. Turned off the main road and into the estate behind. There were some shops in the middle of it. A ten minute walk. Enough time to clear her head, for sure.

Enough time to ponder what had happened. She wished she'd had her mobile with her, then she could call Dawn and talk to her about it. Fucking freaky weirdo, that bloke was. She shuddered. She left the path and crossed the road to the other side. Almost as soon as she had left the main road, the streets narrowed. Kids played in them. There were houses on both sides, facing each other. Cars parked half on and half off the path. Not many of the houses had driveways. Front gardens were tiny. A premium.

But that did mean you could usually see into people houses if you wanted. Just a cheeky glance as you walked passed. See what they were watching on TV. That sort of thing. Nothing weird. Perverted.

Well, Bobby probably did the perverted sort of gazing. But not her. She was a good girl. She wrapped her arms around herself as she walked. The t-shirt short skirt ensemble she was wearing was fine for the weather, but she did feel a little … exposed. Probably the lack of knickers.

She looked into the house she was passing. A couple of heads protruded from above the back of the sofa facing the wall mounted TV. She couldn't tell how old they were, just that they were watching a daytime soap. Some shit like Doctors. The next house had the curtains drawn. Fine.

Janie crossed at the small roundabout and over, the shops were on the corner. She didn't have any money, but that didn't matter. She knew the people that worked most shifts in most of the shops, and they wouldn't mind her doing some window shopping, or getting something on tick. They'd done it before. They all knew that she worked and she was good for it.

No idea if the owners would feel the same way. Not her problem really. She could see the Spar shop along the road. There was a Co-op next to it. She wasn't as welcome in there, but then, that was a corporation. Probably had to balance the tills and such. Not so easy to get tick in those sort of

places. There was the pub, of course. The owners in there—nice couple—Donnie and Diane, they would let her have one on her tab. Janie thought that one of them—Diane, at least—suspected that Bobby knocked her about sometimes and that was why she was so nice to her.

Not a bad idea. Maybe get a pint.

Coming up on the line of shops, Janie glanced down the side of the Co-op. Usually a trash infested shit hole, on this occasion there were a couple of lads down there. Late teens, probably. They were smoking. It was unlikely to be tobacco. One of them saw her look and called out, "All right, love?" She ignored him. It was best to ignore them. They went away, if you did.

She looked in the window of the Co-op, not stopping, the place where the cashpoint should be was boarded up. Ram-raided again, she expected, then she glanced between the Spar and the pub. Drink to take home? Share with Bobby? One in the pub? Just to herself. No contest really.

Janie crossed over to the *Bag and Tennant, Free House*. She pushed the door open and stepped in. Traditional place, it was. Like it had dropped out of the eighties. For some reason, even though the cigarette ban was some fifteen years ago, long before she'd ever set foot in a pub, the place still seemed to stink of it. It had that strange rough felt over all the seats. Sort of like a school bus. The bar had stools around it, but ones that were bolted to the floor, like there had been one too many bar fights. Everything else was wood, but not classy dark wood. Light wood. Again. The eighties.

And the place was nearly always half empty.

Even in the middle of a housing estate known mostly for the high unemployment.

"You look like you've had a day." Donnie was behind the bar polishing a glass. He always seemed to be doing that. Polishing a glass. She walked over and perched herself on one of the stools, glancing around. Dead. One other person. Old Roger. He was usually in there. He'd come in and make a pint last most of the day. Least he was never any trouble, and kept to himself. It seemed like he'd retired a decade ago, and just wanted to spend his days nursing a beer.

"That I have," she replied. "There's an accident out on the main road, just outside my place. Nasty. Guy's been hit by a car. Cut up real bad."

Donnie nodded. “What can I get you?”

“Oh, nothing.” She looked down at the bar. “I just came in to see how you two were doing.”

Donnie snorted lightly, almost under his breath. “On the house,” he said. He took the glass he was polishing and started pouring a Guinness. “How’s that man of yours?” He asked. He didn’t look up though.

“Fine,” she said, quietly. “You know it was the weirdest thing. That guy who was hit by the car. He was staring at me when it happened. He was looking across the road to me in the window. It was like he fancied me or something.”

Donnie placed the stout down on the beer towel on the bar in front of her. “You sound surprised. Good looking lass like you.”

She smiled. Snorted. Snotty one. “Fuck off,” she said, a little giggle. “No, it’s like there was something wrong with him.”

“Maybe it’ll be on the news later,” he said.

“What’s that?” Diane came around the corner of the bar, from out the back.

“Accident on the main road. Might be fatal,” Donnie replied.

“Maybe,” she said. “But the news seems to be full of this thing going on at the farms out by Canterford way.”

Janie supped the ale. “What’s that?”

Diane stopped what she was doing and tapped the beer mats against her lips. “I don’t really know. I don’t think they really know. Something’s only gone and killed all the sheep out at one of the farms over there. Not far away, either. What? Thirty miles away? On our doorstep. Last thing we need. I remember foot and mouth. Bird flu. Don’t need another one. Anyway. How’s that man of yours?”

“Fine.” Janie swivelled on the stool and faced the bar again.

“Good. No troubles in the homestead then?” She continued around the bar, dispersing beer mats. She wasn’t really looking for an answer. She was just digging at her. Probably.

“Nah.” She waved up at the TV behind the bar. “Stick it on then. Let’s see what’s going on in the world.”

C H A P T E R 4

Janie held the pint to her lips but wasn't drinking. She was watching the TV over the rim of the glass. BBC News 24. The newscaster was saying that there was some infection coming from the animals. Something that people could catch, and that the whole area was under quarantine. That people should avoid it. That until they'd done more testing, people should stay off farmland. Just in case.

"Fucking hell," Donnie whispered. "What's the world coming to?"

Janie shook as the sound of a glass hitting the bar rang out next to her. She turned. It was Old Roger. He'd moved over and was sitting on the stool next to her. Glass drained. "I knew," he said, "something like this was afoot."

"What you talking about?" Donnie shook his head, giving a traditional *we-got-a-right-one-here* look to Diane as she crossed in front of him, returning to the back.

"I can feel it in my balls," he said.

"Hey," Donnie scolded, "not in front of a lady."

"It's all right," Janie said, holding back a grin.

"There's something rotten in the town today," Roger said. "You mark my words." He stood up and went to the door. "You mark my words," he repeated, leaving.

Janie turned back to Donnie, after watching him leave. "What the fuck?" she whispered.

Donnie shrugged. He turned back to the TV. "Football's on the other side, do you mind?" He didn't wait for an answer before flipping the channel.

Great, Janie thought. At least they were pretty to look at. She sipped her pint. No hurry to get home.

—

Half time came and went and the team in purple were winning one to nothing. No idea who they were. Didn't care much either. Janie sat on the stool, alone in the bar. She was still nursing the same beer that she'd had for

the last hour. Didn't want to leave, didn't want to ask for another. No money. Fucking hell. She was going to have to leave soon.

Donnie was out the back doing something. Probably making sandwiches, or unwrapping pork pies or something, and she hadn't seen Diane for a while.

Then the TV cut out. She looked absently at the screen. The box was still working. The signal had dropped out. "Donnie," she called. "I don't give a rat's arse, but you should know your TV's gone and fucked up."

Donnie came out from the back and looked at the screen. "Shit," he muttered. He picked up the remote and jabbed at the buttons pushing the remote closer to the TV with each thumb jab. "All the channels are gone."

"What?" she said. "You want me to try?"

He stared at her. Just quickly. It said a volume about *pressing buttons better than me?*, and she decided not to pursue the question.

Then the TV flickered back to life. A red screen. "What the hell is wrong with this thing," he said, changing channels again. And again. And again.

Each channel was showing the same thing.

Then the broadcast changed. The Prime Minster. She was standing behind a podium with a curtain behind. "This is an announcement for the people of Britain," she said.

Janie glanced at Donnie and then back to the screen. "Diane," he called. "You better come take a look at this."

"There has been an outbreak of an animal pestilence in Kent, Sussex, and Lancashire. At the moment, we do not know the cause of it, however, my advisors have suggested that we move swiftly, to ensure the safety of the people." She stopped speaking, staring at the camera, but she looked like there was more.

As if she had forgotten her lines.

She was shuffling about. Beyond the podium. It was weird. Like she was scratching at herself. Janie watched. The fuck? "What's she up to?" She glanced down to Donnie and Diane, both stood watching from behind the bar, Donnie with a glass in his hand, cleaning it. Donnie's head bobbed from side to side.

"It looks like she's …" His words drifted off.

There was a scream on the TV from behind the camera and it toppled. The picture flickered as the camera hit the floor and then everything was on its side. Janie couldn't take her eyes from it. "Fucking hell," she said too quietly for anyone else to hear. "What's …" Then her words drifted off, too.

The Prime Minister came back in the shot. It was somewhat of a shock to see the Madam P.M. holding the face of a cameraman, pinching his chin to keep him from moving it away from her—not that he was trying. The two of them were smashing lips like horny teenagers on a first date. Which was not only odd because of the P.M. thing—decorum and all—but also because Madam P.M. was married, and in her late sixties. Each to their own, but none of it seemed right somehow. Suddenly the camera's view of the two of them was blocked by another woman who Janie didn't recognise, falling in front of it. She could only see the woman's torso, but she knew it was a woman because she wasn't wearing any clothes.

"The fuck?" Diane shouted. "This shit?"

Janie tore her eyes from the TV and glanced at Diane. It was most unusual for her to swear. Looking back at the TV, the woman was rocking back and forth. She was voluptuous, and her tits were rocking like someone was fucking her off camera. Which, of course, they couldn't be, because they were in a TV studio. Obviously.

The transmission stopped and the picture on the TV returned to the red background.

"Okay," Janie said. "What the fuck was that?"

Donnie was staring at the screen, unmoved. He had the glass in one hand and a rag in the other, the two things touching, and his mouth was open, slightly. "Huh," he said.

"Politics," Diane said.

"Yes," Donnie agreed.

"I suppose I should go," Janie said, quietly. "See what's for dinner." *Not a lot*, she thought. Not much in. Order a takeaway, she supposed. She picked up her glass and supped the last of the pint down, before standing to leave. The dried cum on her legs was chaffing a bit, and she wished that she hadn't left in such a hurry now. That, and Bobby was probably going to be

pissed at her for not coming back in sooner. He would want to show her his amazing kills on the killing game. Whatever it was called.

She took a step backwards towards the door. Something in the back of her mind was telling her that perhaps she should wait there for a little while.

Then the TV changed back to the football.

And Janie took a step closer to the screen.

The camera was on one of those wide shots, where you could see some of the pitch, the crowd. Good for those long passing shots. That was about the extent of Janie's knowledge of the game. The shot was stationary, and there were players on the pitch. But the crowd had spilled onto it too. Like the game was over and everyone was too excited. But they weren't running around and chucking toilet rolls at each other—she'd seen the pictures on the news—but rather, they seemed to be in some sort of huge … massive … orgy. The camera was far enough away that you could see what they were doing, just not too many details.

Donnie dropped the glass he was cleaning. It shattered on the floor.

And Janie slipped back onto the stool.

What struck Janie was that most of the people on the pitch were men. Obviously it was expected that most of the crowd at a football match would be men, but Janie thought it odd that they were all fine with fucking each other. It was her experience that most men that went to the football were blokey-blokes who, gay or not, wouldn't admit it, not least at the game. Bunch of useless homophobes. In her experience.

Anyway, there was probably a hundred or more people in the shot, and they were all fucking. All of them. Some of them paired off, and going at it —she would use the term, normally, except, national television, football pitch—and others seemed to be in some human centipede setup with as much pleasuring going on as possible.

"Well, strike a light," Janie said. "Won't you look at that? Free love."

"Why are they all having sex?" Donnie asked.

"I don't know." Janie grinned. "But I have a new found love of the game." She tapped on the bar. "I'll have another."

"Look." Diane pointed at the screen. "There." She'd Where's Wally'd the screen and found in the bottom corner, some guy lying on the pitch. It

looked like their head had been crushed, trampled. And someone was still fucking them in the arse.

"That dude *is* fucking a corpse, right?"

Then the screen went blank.

C H A P T E R 6

"Someone needs to call the BBC. Make a complaint." Diane was shaking her head, staring at the imageless TV as Donnie flicked through, channel after channel.

"Jesus Christ," Janie shot her a look. "Is that all you can think of? Haven't you seen 28 Days Later?" Diane stared blankly at her. "Day of the Dead? Zombies?" She was banging her head against a brick wall. "Clearly there is something wrong with everybody." Janie pointed at the blank screen. "They were all fucking. This is Britain. People don't fuck on football pitches. Haven't you seen the news? They *fight* over them." She stood. Defiant.

"What?" Diane looked perplexed.

"This is some sort of fucking outbreak." Janie walked over to the window. Her thighs chaffed a little. She still needed to shower. She pressed her face against the window. "Donnie, where was the match?"

"I don't know," he replied quietly. "I only put the game on for the punters."

Janie looked around the empty pub. Punters. She shook her head. "I don't see anything amiss in the street. The game was probably up London way, right?"

Donnie stared blankly at her, with Diane in his arms now. She looked upset.

"Right?" This was ridiculous. "Never mind. It's something that's spreading. We need to be aware of that. Stay away from other people. Isolate. Don't let them bite you."

"You think there was biting as well?" Diane had broken away from Donnie and was standing next to him. "I only saw people *doing it*."

"Bodily fluids," Janie continued. "Don't share bodily fluids."

"They looked like that was exactly what they were doing."

"Aargh." Janie stamped over to the bar. "You're not listening. It's fucking Romero out there." She pointed to the doors of the pub for emphasis. It was like half of her life watching horror movies in the dark was leading to this point. She sighed and looked at the non-reactions from the two of them. "Maybe you should call someone, Diane. The local council,

maybe? Ask them what's up. I'm going to head home. I suggest you barricade yourself in here. The pub should be safe, yeah?"

"What makes you say that?" Donnie asked.

"I saw it in a movie." She turned, pulling her skirt down a little, still aware of her lack of knickers. She went to the door and pulled it open a crack, checking around outside. "We don't know how it transmits, yeah?"

"They were having sex," said Diane.

Janie shook her head, gave a glance back. "Lock it up, eh, Donnie?" Donnie nodded. He looked unsure, like all of this was going over his head. But she couldn't worry about them. Not now. She needed to get home. Make sure Bobby was okay. She supposed. Find some knickers. Definitely find some knickers. She stepped through into the street and looked both ways. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. No flaming ambulances careening by, mowing down screaming children and colliding with cars, panicked, trying to get out of Dodge. She checked that the door was closed behind her, and hoped that they would at least consider closing up for the day. Maybe she could get some more information from the internet when she got home. She checked the road. Clear. Crossed.

Glancing in the front of the Co-op as she walked down the length of the window, she saw someone in there stacking shelves. Good. Normality. That was what she wanted. Normality and a sense that everything was going to be okay.

She reached the end of the line of shops, and once again, made the mistake of glancing down there. As soon as she did, she knew that those cocky bastards would still be down there smoking a joint and she would get another round of their idea of passes made at her. She stopped. The young guy who had spoken to her earlier was down there, still. He was on his own now. He was facing the wall of the shop. He was … writhing against it. He had his hands pressed flat against the painted brickwork, and was thrusting his pelvis against it, like he was doing some shit Elvis impersonation. She let out a rather involuntary *eep*. Then he looked over to her. He twisted his head, leaving his groin attached to the wall. Stood, statuesque for a moment. Then he turned. He stared at her, angry looking. Like he was really pissed at her, for whatever reason. His mouth was slack, open. Made him look a bit like a stroke victim. Janie let her eyes drift down his body.

His cock was sticking out of his jeans. Hard. He had been rubbing it against the wall, seeking some sort of perverted satisfaction. Unperturbed by the fact that the wall had mangled the thin skin that surrounded his thing. The foreskin was torn and hanging off, blood pumped from the end of it like cum—maybe it *was* bloody cum—and his phallus looked generally like it had been in a motorcycle accident. Apart from that, and the slack jaw thing, he looked almost normal.

Well, for someone having sex with a wall, that was.

Janie smiled. She didn't know what else to do. She averted her eyes, and turned to leave, but he started towards her. Cock out. And she immediately knew what was coming. She broke into a run. Down the path, heading out of the estate. She cursed herself. She should have run straight back to the pub, but she just ran in the direction she was going. A quick look over her shoulder, and she could see him behind. Not far. Flip-flops were not running shoes. "Fuck," she shouted. Schlip-schlap-schlip-schlap-schlip-schlap. Fucking hell. She turned again, looked over her shoulder.

Fucker was right there.

"Rape," she shouted.

She looked around the street as the two of them ran. It was about right, wasn't it? The busiest, shittiest estate in the county. Drug dealers on every corner. Ninety percent unemployment rate. And now. Right now. There wasn't a single fucking person in the street. He grabbed her, dragging her down like they were playing rugby. She hit the paving slabs hard, and fast enough to skid. The skin on the palms of her hands tore, sliding up towards her wrists, grit and gravel digging into the supple flesh below. She made a screeching sound like a velociraptor. Turned. He was clawing his way up her body. Cock between them. He was going to fucking rape her in the middle of the fucking estate, in the middle of the fucking street, in the middle of the fucking day.

Fucking, fuck, was he.

Janie pulled her bloody hands towards her face, exposing *his* face to *her* elbows and she started digging them in. As hard as she could, at anything she could. She felt bone on bone. Bone on flesh. She stabbed them at him. Screamed. She kicked out, flip-flops flying everywhere. Landed one knee in his balls. He grunted, but never spoke. He stared into her eyes.

Wild. It was like he was some animal. He *was* some animal. He was trying to get her arms in his grip, stop her from hitting him. “Fuck you,” she screamed in his face, rolling her throat and spitting stringy mucus into his eyes, his skin bloody from the elbowing. He made some roaring sound like he was kid, and she rolled him off to the side, parting them, if only briefly. She pushed herself up to her knees, mirrored by his actions. She grabbed out, getting a handful of privet hedge and using it to drag herself to her feet. He got up by his own steam, blood pissing out of his cock, his eyes bulging where she’d pummelled him, a split lip. Nose bleeding onto his upper lip. Into his mouth.

He had it.

He was a fucking sex zombie.

Eww.

She looked at her flip-flops on the other side of him. Oh well. Turning she threw herself in someone’s front gate, into their front garden. He lunged at her, missing, giving her time to quickly decide whether or not it was worth the risk of trying to get the owners attention. They could have it too. It was already here.

Clearly.

Then he was there, right in front of her. He swung out with his right arm, a pathetic grab. Maybe the blood that was gushing over the pavement, down the side of the Co-op, and over this poor sod’s front garden had something to do with that? She lost her footing staggering into a rose bush. Stupid thorns digging into her bare legs, then she was over, the grass verge. Landed heavy on the well-manicured lawn. She reached out. Grabbed the first thing she saw, and swung it around, wielding it in front of her.

A gnome.

She pushed herself up. Tears streamed down her face. “I will fuck you up,” she said through shaking lips.

He came at her.

“Well fuck you, too,” she said. She jabbed the concrete pointy hat of the garden gnome into his gut, pushing him backwards. He staggered back, away from her, tangling on the bushes. She took her opportunity and raised the gnome up, over her head and slammed it down on his skull. The thud was disappointingly dull, but his head gave in more than the tiny statue did.

He stopped moving, and for the first time his hard-on wavered. He looked at her, the anger gone, replaced with apathetic benevolence. Maybe he was thankful? She staggered away from him, his head seeming to want to hold onto the gnome, and she let it go, falling backwards onto her rump, her skirt riding up to her waist.

He reached up and touched the concrete ornament, impaled into his brain. His fingers felt around it as his brain matter slooped out of the side of the hole, and down, onto his jaw line. Viscous clear liquid was joining it, and a fair amount of blood. The geyser in his trouser region was lessening though, and it looked like he might stop. He dropped, arse first into a rose bush on the other side of the path, when the front door of the house opened and an elderly gentleman in a beige cardy stood there. He looked at the mushed up man in his rose bush whose brains were everywhere, and then to Janie, whose vagina was displayed directly at him.

He shook his head. "What's the world coming to?" he said, and turned back into the house, closing the door.

Janie got up and pulled her skirt down. "The fuckers can be killed," she said. "Thank fuck for that." She looked at the house. The man and—presumably—his wife were standing in the bay window looking at her. The wife had a phone in her hand and was dialling. Janie looked over to the man in the rose bush. The man she'd, by all accounts, just murdered. Until this was all out in the open, perhaps she should make haste, she thought.

C H A P T E R 7

Janie hurried out of the gate and onto the path. She looked back towards the pub and then thought better of it. They would have locked up by now. Hopefully have enough smarts to not answer to the door to anyone. *Hopefully*. Best she headed back to the flat anyway. She should be able to guarantee safety there.

Well, from the outside world, anyway.

She picked up her flip-flops and pulled them back on. The scarring on her hands stung, and the blood that dribbled from them, letting up a little. The scratches from the rose bushes on her legs itched like cat scratches. She half ran along the path as much as her footwear would allow. A car drove by. Normally. She slowed.

Her mind was awash with thoughts. The most prominent was that perhaps she had imagined all this, and possibly just murdered someone who wasn't being controlled by some sex brain virus, thing. But, if that were the case, she reasoned, then he was a rapist motherfucker and deserved everything he got. But she did feel a little sorry for the elderly couple who had a mashed up dead body in their front garden.

She could hear sirens on the air.

Coming from the main road.

Janie ducked into one of the many alleyways that criss-crossed the estate. Rabbit warren it was. For dealers, and whores. Although where the money came from, God only knew.

Crime, perhaps?

Janie waited as the sirens got louder. She couched down and kept a careful watch around the corner. If they were coming to the house she'd just left, they'd surely be looking for her too. She could just see it now. *Yes*, the old woman was saying down the phone. *A half naked tart murdered some poor boy in our front garden. What was she wearing? Not enough, I'd say.*

"Oi." A woman's voice from behind her, in the alley. Janie spun around. It was Lillian. Lillian—Lil, for short—was from the other side of the estate. She was in school with Janie a few years back, a year below her, but had gotten kicked out. She'd been expelled for playing with the boys at lunch time.

"Heya," Janie answered, turning back to look down the road again. To be honest, the two of them hadn't spoken much in the last twelve months. Before that, they had been known to drink together. But only out of convenience, not really friendship. Lil came up to her side and joined her, bent down and looked around the corner.

"Whatadoin?" she asked, a whisper.

"Did you see the football?" Janie asked without looking away from the road. She could almost see the traffic lights on the main road from there.

"The football? Did I fuck. Daryl wanted to put it on so I went over to Wesley's to get some smoke."

Janie glanced at her. "You're still with Daryl?"

"Of course. Massive boy he is. Love it."

"Huh." Janie continued to look up the road. "'Kay."

"What's that about the footie, anyway?"

"Oh, shit. Yeah." She stepped back away from the end of the alley and told Lil about the P.M., the football match fuckfest, and Rapey-McRapeface. All the while Lil stood there with her mouth slightly open, frowning.

Eventually she said, "Sounds like fun."

Janie shook her head. "I don't know how it's spreading." She turned and checked out of the alley towards the road again.

"You sure you ain't been slipped some E? You sound like you're tripping."

"Fuck off," she replied. "I'm heading back to my place. There was a bad accident out front when I left. Should be clear by now. You'll be safe there."

"I should head back to Daryl." Her voice was quiet. "You know, I've never known you to be wrong before."

Janie had been wrong before. Many, many times. Many. *Like that time she met a bloke called Bobby and ended up sleeping with him and moving in together somehow*. But Lil was a trusting sort.

"I'm coming with you," Lil suddenly declared.

“Good.” Janie watched the police car pass the traffic lights and stay on the main road. It wasn’t coming for her. Thank fuck.

“You hiding from the pigs?”

“Yeah. Murdered some dude, remember?”

“Oh, yeah.” The years and years of drug abuse had weighed heavily on Lil’s short term memory and ability to focus. “Come on then. Where you at, remind me.”

Janie followed her out into the street and overtook her on the path. “Come on,” she said. “On the main road.”

—

The car that had smacked into the man earlier outside her flat had been dragged to the side of the road to allow one side of it to be reopened. Janie looked at the dark bloodstain on the road where it used to be. There were police everywhere. One of them put his hand up and stopped Janie as she tried to pass him to get to the flat. “Sorry, Miss,” he said. “You’ll need to cross to the other side. There’s been an accident.”

No shit.

“I live here,” she said, pointing to the front door of the flat.

“Did you see the accident?” he asked.

She shook her head. Didn’t want to get involved. Besides, there were too many people about. However this thing travelled, it hit the match hard and fast. She just wanted to be inside. The policeman nodded, and lifted the tape for her to go into the front gate of the building. She stopped, Lil bumping into the back of her, as she left the path, turning back to him. “What happened?” she asked. “Was anyone hurt?”

“It was quite bad, miss,” he replied. That was all she was getting.

Fatality then.

C H A P T E R 8

Lil slumped down on the sofa, Bobby was on the Playstation, sitting on the floor between the sofa and the TV. No fucking surprise there. “Where have you been?” he said. Didn’t take his eyes from the screen. Wanted to show some dominance, but didn’t actually care. Obviously.

“Did you see the accident outside?” Janie asked. She dropped down the flap on the drinks cabinet that they’d picked up from a charity shop a couple of months ago. At least he hadn’t touched the vodka that was in there. He didn’t answer her question, so he either wasn’t listening—which was most likely—or hadn’t seen the accident. Either way, what did she really care? She poured herself and Lil a shot glass of the liquid and went and sat next to her on the sofa. Lil was watching the TV with some intensity. The last few times that Janie had spent any real time with her, Lil had seemed to have trouble focusing on anything for more than a few minutes. It was like her attention span was shot to shit. Video games seemed to have the quick fire action that she needed to keep her eyes on it. Janie looked at the screen. Some sort of driving game. With guns.

At least Bobby was wearing some clothes now. He had pulled on a vest and pair of cargo shorts. She sipped her drink. And glanced to Lil. She was enthralled. Hence the three of them sitting in silence. “Fucking hell,” she muttered. No point in asking to see the news or try the TV channels then.

She pulled her phone out from between the cushions and unlocked it. The battery only had fifty percent left on it. “You been using my phone?” she asked, pushing her toes into the small of Bobby’s back to hopefully get his attention. He just grunted. He was holding the controller like a steering wheel and leaning to the sides when he went around corners like he was in a real car. She could see him even trying to see over hills. Stupid fuck.

Something on his shoulders caught her attention. She leaned forward, putting the phone down next to her. “What’s this?” She reached towards him, but didn’t touch, like it might burn her.

“What?” he asked. Aggravated.

She didn’t bother responding. Fuck him if he was going to be like that. But she got a little closer. It was a rash of some sort. It was red. Really red. Like a fucking burn mark. Raised. It looked like it was getting pus-y under the skin. She looked at Lil, her attention still on the TV. *What if Bobby had*

it? Shit. What should she do? She picked her phone back up and went over to the drinks cabinet. Poured herself another. She stood facing the cabinet, her drink and the phone on the flap. She flipped the phone to the internet. Google News.

Fuck.

The top stories. All of them. Panic in the streets. People are dying. What the fuck was going on? She opened one of the stories. It was garbled mess. Like the reporter had typed all this shit in a phone while trying to run or drive or something. People. Voracious acts of carnality. Fucking hell. Why couldn't they just say sex?

Janie skimmed down the article looking for symptoms. Nothing. It was just rambling panic. She went back to the results page, tried another. Much the same. It was … was… chaos.

She looked back over to Bobby. He'd put the controller down on the floor. Still staring at the TV. She shot a look to Lil. Still watching. There was nothing happening on the screen. What was she looking at? "Lil," she said.

Lil turned her head slowly. She looked straight at Janie. She smiled a little. Still held her glass of vodka, untouched.

"What's wrong?" Janie asked.

Lil looked at the back of Bobby's head. Then she reached forward and touched him. On the shoulders. On that rash. Urg. She leaned forward and put her glass on the carpet. A second hand went onto Bobby, one on each shoulder. She was rubbing him. Massaging him. He was responding. Head back. Eyes closed. Fuckers. "I am still here you know." She'd always suspected that Bobby would fuck around on her should he feel like it, but she didn't expect him to be so … brazen.

Janie watched, frozen to the spot. Vodka in one hand, phone in the other. Bobby turned, pulling away from Lil's grip, Lil's fingers, her palms, pulling the skin back on his shoulders, parting the bumping calloused rash-skin from the flesh, pus oozing onto her hands. She didn't even flinch. Janie swigged the glass of vodka. She realised it was happening. Right here. The two of them.

Bobby got to his knees, facing Lil. He pulled the zip open on his shorts. Janie could see before he did, that he was already hard. Twice in one day.

Fuck. There *was* something wrong with him.

He got his cock out and started stroking it. Wanking himself off, staring at Lil. It was like he didn't even know Janie was still in the room. Lil stood up. She pulled her t-shirt up over her head. Janie could see her back. The rash. Just like the one on Bobby's shoulders. It was swamping her flesh, over her shoulders, under her bra straps. Yellow pustules were growing and throbbing like it was alive.

Janie pulled back, banging herself on the drinks cabinet.

Lil reached forward, taking his cock in her hands. Janie could see then, the rash he had. It was there too. It must have been covering his body. Blotched. Gross. He was staring into Lil's eyes. Licked his lips. He pushed forward onto her, and the two of them dropped to the sofa. He was thrusting his groin back and forth, fucking her hands, before she let go and pushed her left hand into her trackie bottoms. Under the elastic. She started frigging herself below the thin material. Bobby reached down to her bra, pulling at it, loosening it enough and then man-handling it from her torso.

The rash was over her tits.

He pushed his hands onto them. Squishing them and squeezing them like she might enjoy it. All the while she yanked him with one hand, fingering herself with the other. He grunted somewhere between satisfaction and frustration, dragging himself off her, and standing. He pulled her bottoms off, revealing the rash on her legs, her hand down the front of her knickers. His eyes brightened. He pushed his shorts off, his boxers. Got down onto his knees, and grabbed her hand, moving it away from her cunt. He pushed her knickers to the side and stuck his cock in her. Hard.

It was the most rapey, disgusting thing she had ever witnessed, yet Lil didn't seem to mind. She had wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer.

Janie blinked. Part of her wanted to scream at the two of them. Disgusting fucking shitbags for fucking there. Right there. In front of her.

The other part of her wanted to throw up.

Instead, she made a vague motion in the direction of the door and hurried out, all the while neither of them were paying her any attention. She went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

Frantic.

Janie pulled at her clothes, looked under her skirt, around her slit, where he'd touched her earlier, the sides of her legs. She pulled her shirt off, her bra, pulled her breasts up and looked underneath them in the mirror. Turned around, arching to see her back.

She couldn't see any sign of the rash.

Thank fuck.

There was a shout, and a scream from the living room. Could have been them getting off together. Whatever the fuck it was, she wasn't about to hang around to find out. The flat certainly wasn't the safest place to be. She started to dress again, keeping one foot at the base of the bathroom door to hold it closed, in case either of them came looking for her. Bobby might want seconds.

She put her bra and shirt back on, quickly bandaged her palms, and then hurried back to the bedroom. Pulled a pair of knickers on, up, under her skirt. A pair of trainers. There was more noise from the living room. She crossed to the kitchen and got a knife from the drawer. They only had stupid little, shitty knives. Fuck it. It was better than nothing. She picked up her handbag from the kitchen table and slipped her phone into it. Went out into the hallway.

She could still hear them fucking.

The rash had obviously improved Bobby's performance. She couldn't help but raise a small smile. At least, the relationship was over. But she did feel for Lil. Although what would have happened if Bobby hadn't been there, she didn't know. Looking from the front door to the living room door, Janie looked into the living room. Through the crack between the door and the frame where the hinges were. Morbid curiosity. Lil was kneeling on the sofa, naked, her arms draped across the back of it, and Bobby was behind her, ploughing her from behind. Naked too. The rash was covering both of them almost completely. Red raw skin on every inch of them. It had spread since she had left the room only minutes before. Like the act itself, the fucking, was increasing it virulence. Helping it spread.

Bobby yelled out as he came. But he didn't stop. He just kept banging back and forth. Janie looked down between them. There was cum already. He'd blown his load at least once in the last few minutes, and then again, just now. Lil was making a constant grunt, with each push. And Janie could

see the rawness of the skin when they touched. Bobby was rubbing his hands over her, over her back and her tits, grabbing, clawing at them. The skin where the rash was red, burning. Scrapes and scars in the flesh appearing. Bleeding. Dripping with raw pus as they ground together.

"Fucking hell," she whispered.

Janie left the spot behind the door … and the flat. Out the front to the street. There were still people. She saw a car flash through the traffic lights. There was a person down the street, they looked confused. It could have been the rash. They could have had whatever it was. She looked around. The police had gone from the scene of the accident. But not just gone. It looked like they'd fled.

C H A P T E R 9

Janie looked down the street. She needed to go. Get out of the open. Fuck knows what was going on. The pub. It was the best place. It was close. She pulled her phone out of her bag as she hurried along the path.

Dialled her mum.

"Come on," she said. It rang and rang. No answer. Didn't go to voice mail either. "Fucking hell." She turned down into the estate. Kept a lookout as she walked. Down the alleyways, behind her. She looked into people windows as she passed. Sometimes she saw people in their houses. Some of them were doing normal things like they hadn't heard yet. Like they hadn't seen what was going on. Hopefully the pub would be like that.

She crossed the street when she got to the house where she had gnomed that dude to death in the front garden. It was probably best not to get too close in case the old couple were still there. The police maybe. But there were no cars. From the other side of the road she could see the body in the rose bush still. Limp. Blood pooled at his feet.

At least the motherfucker was flaccid now.

What with all his blood being elsewhere.

She could see the old couple in the window. He was banging her. The old woman was perched in the bay, and he was jack hammering against her. Huh. Janie kept moving. This was all too terrifying and weird for her to observe the strange. She dialled nine-nine-nine and the line came up busy. How the fuck was that busy? As she got up to towards the shops she thought about going in. Maybe getting some supplies to take over the pub.

But surely they'd have anything she needed.

They'd look after her, right?

There was a scream in the distance. Janie looked around. She saw a young man run across the street behind her. He'd come from the alley that she'd bumped into Lil in, before. He sprinted out, into the street, and across, into the alley as it continued on the other side of the road. As he disappeared from sight, another man appeared from the alley. Chasing him.

It was rampant.

A fucking apocalypse.

Literally.

Shit. Janie hurried across the street to the pub. She tried the door. Open. "Fucking hell," she blurted. She pushed the door in and swung around, shutting it behind her, and slamming the bolt at the top across. "I told you to lock up," she said. She turned back into the bar.

Donnie was on the floor. Half visible from behind the bar.

She could see the top half of him. He was bleeding. Blood caked his forehead. His eyes were shut. He was moving, though. He looked like he might be having a fit of some sort, his body rocking back and forth. "Donnie?" she wanted his attention, to see if he was awake, but the words came out muted. She ran over to him, dropping down on her knees next to him. "Donnie," she said again, reaching out this time.

There was a noise from behind the bar. Enough to make her jump, her heart missed a beat. Fuck. She scooted back away from the bar. She should have checked behind it. Stupid. Janie got to her feet again, quietly. She listened. There was more noise. Rustling. Scraping. She reached over and picked up an empty glass from the bar. Instinctively she sniffed it. Stout. It was probably hers from earlier.

What was she doing? She held it at the bottom, out in front of her like a dagger. *Then* she remembered she'd picked up a knife from the flat. Oh well. She had this now. Janie edged around the bar, side stepping to keep herself facing whatever was around there.

She looked, a quick glance to see before committing, and leaping out to face … a young man. Maybe in his teens. He was hunched over Donnie. Donnie was face down on the floor, his shirt pulled up at the base of his back, and there was blood. Lots of blood. Glass everywhere. The guy had a long shard of broken pint glass in his fist and was digging at Donnie's back. Near the kidney area. The blood was spewing from the wound he'd created. A hole. Trench. It filled with blood and trickled over the side. Janie stared in horror at the man. He was grinning maniacally. The rash was all up in his face. His eyes met hers, and she wielded the glass at him, trying to be threatening when all she wanted to do was throw up.

The man discarded the glass and looked at his handy work. He made a strange chirping noise, somewhere between a cat and a sparrow. Then he

leaned himself up, onto his knees, and dropped his trousers. He was commando.

He was hard.

He positioned himself quickly over Donnie and jammed his dick in the wound he'd created on his back.

Janie retched. She made an unavoidable donkey noise, drawing the man's look to her. He was thrusting in and out of the wound now. Two strokes to rhythm. Each time he pushed in, Donnie's body squirted out more of his blood like a water pistol, up the man's front wetting him, slooging Donnie's liquid up and over his t-shirt. "Jesus fucking Christ," she blurted. He didn't stop with his motion. Like the rolling of the sea, but faster. Desperate. Like he was on the clock. Under a timer. He was grinning at Janie. Drool leaving his lips and running down his chin like a head case.

Janie looked at the glass in her hand and then to this monster. This sex zombie. "Aargh," she shouted, lunging forward with the glass, swing it at the side of the infected's head.

C H A P T E R 1 0

The glass donked off the side of his—its—head, not breaking. Janie was, in all fairness, a little disappointed. The man wavered a little, surprised, perhaps, but didn't stop fucking Donnie's body. Janie looked at him, glanced to the glass, and then back to him. Then she smacked the rim of the glass on the side of the bar, smashing it into a jagged toothy affair of very jabby things. "Ha," she shouted, and then tried hitting at him again.

This time she slashed the broken glass across his face, the side of his head, part of his ear lobe detached and went flying across the bar, plopping onto one of the bar stools. He just grinned, blood seeping at first from the cat scratch wounds on his head. Then they started to pour, blood weeping on the rash.

But none of this stopped him.

Janie got up, stood over him, raised the glass up. He looked up at her, still rolling his hips as his cock slid about in Donnie. "Stop with the fuckening," she said, slamming the glass down into the middle of this fuckers face.

The glass shattered more as it hit the bone, tearing its way through the flesh of the man's face. It de-gloved a large portion of his head, leaving the white of the bone of his skull, glistening under some mixture of liquids, blood and weeping fluids, clear, mixing together to some pink foul smelling, gross, soup. She could still see his smile under the flap of skin that hung down. One of his eyes was gone.

Janie raised her foot and planted it flat on the fuckers chest, hard, kicking him from his precarious position, down, onto his back beyond Donnie. "Fuck you," she said. She glanced down at Donnie. Now, without this monster fucking a hole in his back, Donnie wasn't moving at all. Janie leapt over him, down onto the zombie-thing, onto her knees over its belly. She brought the broken glass up. Down. Up. Down. Stabbing indiscriminately into the creatures face, its neck. Chest. Shoulders. With each blow, more of the things flesh parted from his head, its torso. Bits of it flew up into the air, followed by sprays of blood like some twisted shampoo commercial. She stabbed down onto its shoulder as it tried to struggle against her, cutting through its flesh, muscles, hacking at the ligaments of the left arm. Eventually it stopped moving. The arm. The things face was a

mush of flesh and bone, she could see its nose bone. Teeth loose and out, blood running from its mouth. It was still flopping about beneath her.

Not dead.

Why wasn't it dead yet?

Then she could feel it moving its right arm. It was trying to get it around, underneath her arse, trapped below her. Doing … something. She lifted the glass back up, strewn with gore, flesh stuck to it. It looked like one of those things in the window of a kebab shop. Like an elephants leg of raw meat.

He was still moving his arm, but wasn't trying to escape. It wasn't trying to fight her off. It was …

"Oh," she screamed, pulling herself off the things stomach and onto her feet. She didn't want to look, but couldn't stop herself. He—it—had wrapped its fingers around its still hard cock and was stroking itself. Stunned, she looked up its body. The further her eyes travelled up it, the more of a mess it became, until the face, barely recognisable as human. Its blood had leeched over the floor, a pool of ever extending blood circling outwards.

Its hand was getting slower, as the bubbles that plopped through the blood that filled where its mouth used to be, stopped.

Its hand relaxed.

Its cock waned as blood stopped pumping around its body.

"Fucking hell," she whispered. Janie looked down at herself. She was painted in the creatures innards. Blood. Bits of its face. Tongue. Plasma. Fuck. Her attention fell to Donnie. "Shit," she muttered, dropping down next to him, releasing the glass from her hand. "Don," she said. He hated it when anyone called him that. "*Don*," she said again. She pushed him, trying to roll him over. There was a lot of blood over him and the floor. She felt his neck looking for a pulse. She didn't find one, but didn't really know if she was putting her fingers in the right place, either.

Janie tenderly ran her fingers over the area of his head that was bleeding. It was dented. Like it shouldn't have been. Poor fuck was probably dead before he hit the ground. She looked at the wound in his back. Maybe it was just as well.

She got to her feet and pulled the kitchen knife out of her bag. “Diane?” she called. “Diane, can you hear me?” She went through to the back of the pub, holding the knife out in front of her, like she might be jumped at any second. “You here? It’s me, Janie.”

C H A P T E R 1 1

"Diane," she called. "Are you there?" Janie held the knife out and pushed the door behind the bar open. Beyond was darkness. There were no windows. She looked around. There was a strip of light under the door to the left. A stairwell in front. The stairs must go to the flat upstairs. She'd seen the windows from out the front, and had always assumed that the two of them must live up there. She knocked on the door on the left, knife still held in the other hand. "Diane?"

"Who's there?" Diane's voice came from the other side of the door. It was quiet. Weak.

"It's me," Janie said. "Janie. Can I come in?" She heard the bolt on the other side of the door slide across. Janie turned the handle and opened the door just a crack. "You okay?" she asked.

"Where's Donnie?" Diane replied. "He made me come in here and promise not to open up unless it was him."

Janie looked down at herself. This wasn't going to be easy. She opened the door a little further, but didn't step in. "He's in the bar," she said quietly. "I think he's …" Her voice drifted to silence as Diane started to wail. Janie pushed the door open, wanting to comfort her, and Diane looked up. She froze in mid-cryface, and Janie realised what she must look like. "Fuck," she said quietly. "It's not what you think."

Well it wasn't, technically.

Diane was sitting on the edge of the bath. The room on the left was a small, yet fully furnished bathroom for use by the staff. Why they had a bath in it, Janie didn't know. Diane screamed out in sadness and Janie hurried over, sitting beside her, pushing the bloodless knife into her bag. "Someone had come into the bar," she said. She put her arm around Diane's shoulders and got blood and shit all over her. "I fucked him up good and proper though." Diane was nod-crying. At least she seemed to understand.

"You've got blood on you," she said.

Janie nodded. *No shit*. She looked into the bath behind them. There was a shower on the wall. "Any chance I could," she nodded at the shower, feeling bad for asking. But she was covering in the infected's blood, after all.

Diane nodded, getting to her feet. She waved at the door and said, "I'll just …" she was still crying.

"Don't go in the bar," Janie warned. "Why don't you go upstairs? Make us a nice cup of tea, and I'll be up shortly."

Diane nodded and left the bathroom, turning and going upstairs. Janie went to the door and watched her. She then closed and bolted it. She pulled her clothes off her as fast as she could, turning the shower on at the same time. The water ran cold. Fucks weren't given. At least her underwear was bloodless. She dropped them in the dry sink to keep them away from the rest of the clothes, strewn about the floor and getting everything muddy-red. She stepped under the cold water, shivering hard. The icy water refreshed her, while making her shake. And once she started shaking she couldn't seem to stop.

"It's just shock," she said to herself, over and over. Looking down, the water in the bath ran from red to pink, to clear as the gore and blood, sloshed down into the tub and most of it washed away. Eventually she was left standing in ankle deep water, after the plug was blocked with bits of *it*. She got out the shower and stood in front of the mirror naked. She examined herself now she was clean, looking for signs of the rash.

Part of her felt she was being paranoid, blaming this rash for it, but the other part of her told her it wasn't just a coincidence.

She seemed to be clean. Free of it.

Thank the fucking Lord.

She pulled her underwear back on and looked at her skirt and shirt. Both fucked up with the blood of a monster. Blood she had no particular desire to get close to, let alone dress in. She took her bag, grabbing the knife again and holding it out, before opening the bathroom and looking out into the corridor beyond. Still in her underwear. She looked around—couldn't see much without the light—and then slipped out into the corridor and onto the stairs. She padded, nearly naked up to the flat upstairs, barefoot, but armed. Wet, but clean.

Janie got to the door at the top of the stairs. A front door like you would have in the street. Good. At least it should be secure. She knocked. "Diane, it's me," she hissed, still trying to be as quiet as she could.

Diane opened the door like nothing was wrong. She looked down Janie, and said, “Oh, look at you.” She turned and shambled down the hallway and off to the side. She was wearing a pair of carpet slippers. She wasn’t before. She was wearing shoes. Fuck it. She’d lost it. Janie entered the flat. It was warm. The carpet was welcoming on her bare feet. She closed the door behind her and made sure it was secure.

Diane reappeared with a small pile of clothing. “Here,” she said. “This might fit.”

Janie didn’t give two shits if it did or didn’t, really. Clothes were clothes. She pulled a t-shirt over her head, and dragged on a pair of jeans. The jeans were a little too long, but about right around the waist. Diane’s. The t-shirt was massive. Donnie’s. She shivered and hugged herself.

“Tea?” Diane said, wandering to the end of the hallway and into the kitchen.

Janie nodded, following her, behind. This wasn’t going to be easy.

C H A P T E R 1 2

Janie followed Diane into the kitchen. She was smiling. Humming the tune of some soap opera. What the fuck. She'd lost her marbles, clearly. Christ. Janie slipped down into an empty seat at the kitchen table and watched the woman potter around.

Making tea.

"You okay?" she asked as she watched.

"Uh, huh." An agreement. Vague, but sure.

"He didn't suffer," Janie offered. It didn't seem like much, and Diane stopped. She had just put the teabags in the pot. Very old fashioned. She hung her head. Just a little. Like she was thinking. "What can I do?" Janie asked.

"Fuck me," she said.

Shit.

"What?" Janie asked, quietly. She put her hand in her bag and gripped the knife again, waiting for sex-zombie Diane to turn and pounce.

"I said, fuck me," she replied. "Excuse the language."

Janie let her grip loosen a little. "You okay?" she asked again, this time more tentatively.

Diane nodded without turning. "I just thought that Donnie and me, well, we were going to make it, you know? I was married before." She continued to make the tea. "Violent bastard he was. Used to knock me about a bit. Got all fighty when his dinner wasn't on the table in time." Janie could hear her crying gently as she spoke. "One day Donnie came round. He knew my ex from work. We'd never met. And my ex just slapped me for not plating up for another. Of course, I didn't know that Donnie was coming over, did I? How could I. Should have used that sixth sense. The one that would stop me from getting the shit kicked out of me for no reason.

"Donnie watched him do it. I've never had someone defend me before. But Donnie wasn't having none of it. He stood up to my ex like I'd never seen anyone do before. He got between us. Told Peter—my ex—that he needed to back away. That he couldn't hit a woman. It was very gallant. My knight in shining armour."

Diane put a cup of tea down on the table in front of Janie, and sat opposite, with one of her own.

"Peter raised his hand up to hit Donnie. And Donnie wasn't going to have any of that, either. He pushed him aside and grabbed the cleaver that I had been cutting the beef up with for the curry. I was making curry. Peter liked that. Anyway, he hit Peter in the neck with it. It was like he was some angel of death, there to protect me from evil. Killed Peter instantly." Diane looked Janie in the eyes for the first time and smiled. "I don't suppose it matters me telling anyone now. Does it?"

Janie shook her head, speechless.

"The end of the world, and all. So after Donnie had pulled the cleaver out of his neck, Peter fell to the floor. I couldn't help myself. I tore that man's clothes off like a horny groupie, and I had him, right there in the kitchen, next to my ex's body. Best. Sex. Ever. Then we loaded the body up in the boot of Donnie's motor and drove it down to the Black Forest. Buried him. I told everyone that cared—not a lot of people did—that he'd run off with some tart and no one thought enough of him to disagree, and I moved away with Donnie." She looked around the room. "We brought this place and lived happily ever after." She sighed. "Well, until now."

Janie realised her mouth was open slightly so she pulled it together. "Well," she said. She had always thought that the two of them were just married. Childhood sweethearts, or something. Nothing so grand in their history as a murder-rescue-thing. It was quite sweet actually. Janie wondered if she'd have thought as much if she hadn't murdered one or two people this morning herself. "So what are we going to do?"

Diane looked up at her. "Oh, yes. I'll put the radio on. You see if there's anything on the Internet. You should pick up the free wi-fi from the bar up here." She got up and went over to the radio, acting like none of this was happening. Like her … husband? … wasn't lying in a pool of blood in the bar downstairs.

She was concerned about Diane's mental health, but still did what she had suggested.

Janie pulled her phone from her bag and opened Google news again. The stories were mounting. None of them used the *Z* word. No one had thought to call them sex zombies, not yet, but the reports were there. There

was panic on the streets. People were turning on each other. The reports kept using the word assault. Stay in your homes they were saying. She scrolled from site to site. There were people putting up video footage. People fucking in the street. Some of them weren't infected. Being raped. Others were. They were just fucking each other raw. Some weren't moving. Like Donnie. Janie shook her head and closed the browser. She turned to Diane. She was going from channel to channel.

"Most of the big stations aren't there, or are just playing music. Probably their emergency no-one-turned-into-work playlist. Here, this is Birchingate FM. It broadcasts from the school around the corner."

The national news outlets are telling people to stay in their homes. I've seen what's happened even at the station here, and I don't know if that's going to make a difference. I'm locked inside my booth and I'm staying here. I'll transmit as long as I can. Trying to make anything out of the conflicting reports from across the UK, it doesn't look localised, but it doesn't look like it's happening anywhere else in the world either. Some people are blaming science. Others are saying it's retribution from God. Either way, it doesn't look good.

Diane turned the radio off and stared at it. "Now what?"

"We barricade ourselves in and hope for the best, I suppose."

CHAPTER 13

"You don't need to do this." Janie was standing between Diane and the door to the bar.

"We need to make sure that they're dead. And you're the one who keeps mentioning zombies. We need to make sure that they aren't going to rise from the grave and eat our brains."

"It's not a movie," Janie said. She realised how weak the argument was before she'd finished saying it. Zombies, no, of course not. Sex-zombies? Well, that was a different matter. She nodded. "Yeah, okay." She pushed the door open and stuck her head around into the bar. There were no zombies, sex or otherwise. The two of them had been upstairs for a couple of hours and the smell in the bar was awful. Sure, it was a warm summery day, but Janie hadn't expected them to turn bad quite that quickly. She stepped out and held her hand over her mouth. Donnie was laying on the floor, unmoved. He didn't look any different than when she had left him. Maybe the pooled blood was blacker. His skin paler. As she walked around the bar, the stench got stronger. She looked at the man she'd killed. The zombie. Excuse me, sex-zombie. He was mashed up, just as she had left him, but he was rotting. Fast. It was like he'd been dead for days. Maybe longer. Even through her hand, Janie could smell him. No, she didn't know what dead bodies should smell like, but this wasn't right.

"What the fuck is that?" asked Diane.

Janie shook her head. The corpse's blood had dried out, turned black, and started to flake away like paint spilled yesterday. His flesh was hard like beef-jerky. He smelt like three-day-old turkey that hadn't been refrigerated. She knelt down next to it. "It's not right," she said. "I ain't no doctor, but decomposition like this shouldn't happen in the span of hours, right?" She could see maggots in the wounds. Glancing to Donnie and back, Donnie was still … juicy. That was probably the wrong word. This one? He'd dried out. A husk. She'd seen Criminal Minds. This was the body of someone dead for a week or more. "This might be important." Janie turned back to Diane.

She was standing over Donnie, staring at the wounds on his back, on his head. Tears on her cheeks.

Janie got up and pulled Diane's face into her shoulder. "Come on," she whispered. "Let's get you out of here." She led the woman back out to the hallway and the stairs. "Why don't you go upstairs and have a lie down? I'll grab some table cloths." Diane nodded and turned up the stairs. Janie went straight back into the bar. She held her hand over her mouth. The stank made her want to throw up. Her stomach rolled over and over, until it made her want to shit too. She went from window to window making sure everything was secured. She checked the door she'd locked earlier. Then out to the kitchen. Back door to the fire escape. More windows. She made sure that *everything* was locked up before she rummaged around in the backroom to find something to cover the bodies.

By the time she had found a couple of dark blue table cloths—the one's they used for the occasional wedding reception—she returned to the bar to find the other corpse decomposed further. It was like time was passing differently for it. The flesh had withdrawn from its fingers making it look like its nails were still growing. She could see its teeth and gums where it had died with a maniacal grin on its face, and where she'd hacked off large chunks of flesh. Again there was decomposition.

Donnie looked like he could still turn over and get up. Brush it off like he was asleep the whole time.

What the actual fuck?

She covered the two bodies and went back upstairs. Diane wasn't in the kitchen, so Janie assumed she was in bed. Blacked out from all the stress, probably. She went to the window in the kitchen. It looked out into the street at the front of the pub. She could see the shops from there. The road. Paths. Some of the houses.

She stayed back so that anyone outside stood less chance of seeing her.

There were a few of them out there. They seemed uncontrollable. They certainly didn't try to control themselves. There were two women. They were naked. One of them was straddled across a guy laying on the path. He was screaming. Not infected. She was fucking him. The other was trying to force herself onto his mouth. All the while the two of them were playing with each other's tits. There was a man and woman fucking on a car. Apart from the man on the path, Janie could see the rash. It was swarming them. All over them.

She looked at the man. She wanted to help. Another of the infected ran by. Naked. Hard. The flesh flaying from his feet as the gravel from the road dug into it, grating the skin off. Blood trails remained where his feet had padded. He had bits of him broken, damaged. He looked like he might have been hit by a car and slid down the road. Naked. The rash was on him. Over him.

And he looked like he was falling to pieces.

Rotting away.

She pulled back from the window, unable to watch anymore. She didn't want to hear the screams of the man who wasn't infected. Well, even without knowing how the thing transmitted, he was probably infected now.

They probably all were.

Janie roamed the kitchen for a few minutes, and then sat at the table. She twiddled with her teacup, before getting up and looking to see if there was a bathroom up here, too.

CHAPTER 14

Standing in front of the mirror, Janie examined herself. Did the rash come first, before the madness? She didn't know. She'd only guessed. That was what she had seen with Bobby. Lil. She looked in her eyes first, examining how tired she looked. Then she started to pull up her clothes, checking her belly. Her breasts. She pulled her shirt off and turned, looking at her back as best she could.

She was exhausted, and hurt.

But she didn't have any signs of the infection.

Pulling her clothes back on, she went into the hallway. Had to find Diane in one of these other rooms. She was probably sleeping it off. It must have been hard to know Donnie was like that. It wasn't like that with Bobby. He was probably dead by now. She didn't want to think about it, and to be honest, didn't care much either. Listening at the first closed door on the landing, she could hear noises from beyond.

Diane.

Janie tapped her fingertips lightly on the door. She didn't know whether she should wake her or not. Maybe just push the door open and make sure she looked all right. Janie twisted the handle and opened the door a crack. A bedroom. It was dark inside. The curtains drawn. Janie could see Diane on the bed. She was under the covers. Tossing. Turning. Unsure if she was asleep, or just upset, Janie pushed the door open a little further. "Hey," she said. "You okay?"

The shuffling under the covers stopped, but she didn't reply.

The last thing Janie needed right now was for Diane to fucking turn too. Shit. She pushed the door open all the way, the light from the flat illuminating a small amount of the room. Janie stepped in. The room smelt of sweat. Dirty. Maybe it always smelt like that. Fuck it. Until a few hours ago, Donnie and Diane were the landlords of her local and passing friends at best. She'd never been up here. Maybe they were pigs in their private life?

She stepped over to the bed. Diane was covered by the sheets. Janie reached down slowly, taking the cotton in her hand and gripping it. She was going to pull it back. She thought about dragging it off her like a magician

with a tablecloth and then thought better of it. If she was half asleep under there it might give her a heart attack. Janie lifted the sheet and pulled it from where her face was.

She was asleep under the covers. Likely dreaming about Donnie.

But the rash was there. On her face, just below her right eye.

"Cock," Janie whispered. She put the sheet back down. While she was asleep, that was fine, but Janie knew that she would turn. Sooner or later. She backed to the door of the bedroom, never taking her eyes from Diane, twitching in dreams. She stood there watching her. She had to leave the flat. It was the only way to guarantee some semblance of safety.

But that meant *leaving the flat*.

Fuck.

She looked at the bed. It was a pine affair. Not a bad quality. Posts at the four corners. Not like a four-poster bed or anything, but tall enough to be useful.

—

Janie had rummaged in silence around the bedroom and found a variety of ties and belts. The sort of accessories one might own if one ran a pub. She carefully tied one off at each of the posts of the bed. Then, she removed the sheet from Diane. The rash was over her face now. Up close, Janie could see how far it had spread, covering every inch of her skin above the neckline. She took Diane's wrist and lifted it carefully so as not to wake her. Over her head.

She mumbled—grumbled—in her sleep.

Then she pulled one of Donnie's ties, secured to the post, around her wrist, gently tightening it.

She did the same with the other hand.

Janie didn't want to push her luck and do the feet too. Diane could still pull herself free if she tried. The knots weren't pulled tight-tight yet. Not in case she woke her. Janie pulled the knot on Diane's left wrist tight, and then hurried around the bed, pulling the right one tight. The yank on the tie brought Diane awake, and her eyes flicked open. It took her a second of looking around to realise what had happened. Her mouth dropped open as her eyes widened. She looked at Janie. "What …" she said. "What are you

doing?" She yanked on the ties trying to free herself. The knots were good though and didn't give. "What?" she pulled again, harder. "*Let me go*."

Janie drew herself back, away from her. "You've got it," she said, no more than a whisper.

"I don't. What are you saying?"

"The rash," she said. "It's all on you."

Diane's eyes looked around wildly. Her legs thrashed, kicking form side to side. Janie backed out the door and closed it. Diane was screaming. Screaming for her to free her. Let her go. *She was fine*.

Like fuck was she.

Janie rested her head against the door of the bedroom and let out a sigh, a tear running down her face. Diane was wailing. Crying too. Scared. Janie covered her ears with her palms and went over to the living room. She pushed the door closed and went, sat on the sofa. She could still hear the muffled cries coming through the thin walls.

She could still hear cries and screaming coming from outside. In the street.

Janie got up and went to the window looked out. She could just about see the street from there. The man—the one who wasn't infected. He was on his knees now. Middle of the road. Ploughing into the woman that was trying to ride his face earlier. They were bucking together like finishing was the only thing that mattered. But it wasn't. Janie had seen it now. It wasn't finishing the act. It was doing the act. She could see the other woman. The one that was fucking him before. She was lying in the street next to them. Blood everywhere. It looked from this distance like her head had been caved in, but it was hard to tell.

Not that it mattered. Some geezer was fucking the corpse anyway.

Janie suddenly felt sick. She turned and ran from the living room to the bathroom and lifted the toilet seat. She held her stomach as she heaved, leaning her head down, below waist level, allowing the free flow of vomit to come forth. The acidic puke slid from her stomach, bile and green, out through some of her hair, and into the bowl. "Fuck *in* hell," she muttered, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She could see stringy mucus looking sick hanging from a tuft of hair that was hanging down the side of

her head. It made her want to retch again. She flushed the loo and turned to the sink, running the water, and slopping her hair under it to clean it.

Why was she barfing so often? It had been coming and going for a few days now.

Shit.

She left the bathroom. Diane's bedroom was quiet now. She went to the door and listened. Nothing. No sound of movement and no screaming.

C H A P T E R 1 5

Janie pushed the door open. Diane was on the bed. She had stopped thrashing about. Janie flicked the lights on in the middle of the ceiling. Diane was tied in a Christ pose, but she had her legs together, and was rubbing them. She looked like a spastic cricket. Janie watched her. She didn't pay Janie any attention at first. She was just focussing on this weird rubbing motion she'd gotten going. Janie though it looked like she was trying to use friction to start a fire.

Then she realised that she probably was.

She was trying to gain satisfaction by rubbing herself on the only other thing she could. Herself. Janie stepped closer to try and see how bad the rash was, and drew Diane's attention to her. She stared at Janie, the rubbing getting harder. More frantic. She started to grunt, and Janie didn't know if she was achieving her mastabatory goal, or if it was frustration. Exhaustion.

It didn't look easy. Bringing yourself off like that.

Diane's face was red, the rash raw on the skin. She'd grown pus filled boils and lesions, calluses. She looked more like a burn victim. It was like the rashes effects were moving quicker on her than other people she'd seen. Like her inability to satisfy the sexual need was connected to the rash taking hold.

Fucking hell.

Were they just fucking because of some instinctive self-preservation?

"Cunt," Janie whispered. She'd tied her up and probably quickened her death, *if* that was the case. But if she untied her, she wasn't going to be satisfied with frigging herself, now, was she?

She looked at her hands. She was shaking. Fuck. Diane's grunts were persistent. Like she was close but couldn't quite get there. Janie backed to the door. She didn't know what to do, so she drew the door closed and returned to the kitchen.

Made herself another cup of tea.

She didn't really want the tea. It was just something to do. The thought of sexually pleasing this zombie woman wasn't appealing. She picked up her phone off the kitchen table. No signal. She was utterly alone. Her eyes

drifted over the things in the kitchen while she sat there, thinking. She could hear Diane in the bedroom.

Grunting. The occasional call. It was like a trapped animal desperate for freedom.

She had to do something. After all these years of Diane and Donnie being so good to her. *Shit*. Janie stood, pushing the chair back with a whining grind on the tiles of the floor. She strode into the hall and to the bedroom pushing the door back open.

Diane stopped her frustrated rubbing for a split second and looked at her. Then continued. Desperate. Janie walked in, keeping one eye on her. She went to the drawers in the cabinet by the bed and pulled the top one open on the left hand side. Pushing a couple of thrillers aside, there wasn't much in there. A wrist watch. Box of condoms. This must be Donnie's. She went around the bed, still keeping herself away from it, making sure that Diane couldn't reach her. But she was far more interested in trying to pleasure herself, zoned out in some rhythm, than anything Janie was doing.

She opened the bedside drawer on the other side. Romance novel. Horror Novel. Earrings. Mobile phone. She checked. No signal. Also, no dildo. She stood and looked at Diane. "Why did you have to have a decent sex life, eh?" She sighed. A big one. "What the fuck am I doing?" Janie left the bedroom, back to the kitchen. She pulled the fridge open. Crisper drawer. She was no good at this. It wasn't the sort of thing that Bobby would exactly approve of. If he'd caught her. She thought about him and Lil. Wondered if they'd fucked each other to death.

Janie held up a cucumber. She thought about Diane. It'd snap, surely?

"Well, fuck," she said, closing the door of the fridge. She started opening drawers in the cupboards, pulling out anything that was phallic enough. A knife. No. A whisk. Fuck no. Bottle? She stood it on the side. Not perfect but it was better than anything else at the moment. She knelt, opening a cupboard at her feet. "Ah," she exclaimed. Janie reached in and took the rolling pin. It was long, true, but that would stop her from having to get too close. It was wood, so wouldn't bend or break. These things were designed not to let splinters come off. Perfect.

She caught sight of the olive oil on the counter and went to reach for it. "Lube," she said. She stopped herself. She wasn't going to need that, was

she? Not with how fucking horny these things were.

Weighing the rolling pin in her hand, she returned to the bedroom.

CHAPTER 16

"Look," she said. She was standing at the bottom of the bed holding the rolling pin. Diane was staring at her like she was a model in a dirty mag, all the while rubbing her legs together. "You need to understand that I'm just trying to help." Janie let out a little giggle at the sheer absurdity of it.

She rubbed her forehead with her hand. "What the fuck am I doing?"

She held out the pin for Diane to see. "Look," she said, again. "I'm going to … relieve you." She held it, and Diane made no motion to suggest that she'd so much as heard her, than understood. Janie made a jabbing motion, thrusting it at her. "Like a cock," she said. "Donnie? Yes?"

Diane just kept doing what she was doing.

Janie let her hand drop to her side, and her head drop. "I've lost it," she said. "I've actually lost it." She put the rolling pin down on the set of drawers opposite the bed. Every inch of Diane was riddled with the rash now. Pus, mucus, obscure liquids ran from broken tears in her skin. Markings that looked like burns, split open and leaking. She looked like someone has taken a cheese grater to her flesh and not stopped. Parts of her were falling from the bone like she was a pot-roast. Some of her hair was loose on the sheets where it had fallen from her head.

She was beyond saving.

Janie went back to the kitchen and got a knife out the block. The one with the biggest point and went back to the bedroom. "I'm sorry, love. I just don't know how else to help you."

She came to the side of the bed. She didn't try to hide the knife, but she didn't wave it in Diane's face either. But she'd seen it. Didn't stop her from doing the leg-rubbing thing. It didn't stop her from looking at Janie like she was a stripper. "Fucking hell," Janie muttered. She raised the knife up, Diane still holding a salacious gaze.

Janie stabbed the knife down into Diane's stomach. All the way to the handle. She expected her to die, but she didn't. It didn't even seem to slow her down. She brought the knife out, and blood spurted from the hole like a geyser. Warm, and thick. "Ahh," Janie took a step back instinctively. "Fuck." She didn't want to get more of this fucking blood on her, but she'd started now. She stepped up, and stabbed down into her gut again. The only

thing it achieved was more blood, and louder grunts from Diane. “Fucking hell.” She pulled the knife out. Big spurt. In. Out. In. Out.

She pushed it in, twisting the blade around.

Diane was squirming. She was rubbing her legs together even harder. The grunts were turning to screams. She was hefting air in and out.

“Jesus, you’re enjoying this?” Janie pulled the blade out. Bits of Diane’s insides came out, wrapped around the knife. Guts. Intestines? Maybe? Janie flicked the blade and the gore and gloop slipped off, flipping around the room. Sticking to the wall like cooked spaghetti. “Oh, God.” She looked at Diane.

O face.

“Fuck,” she said. “No.” Diane’s stomach was pooled with blood, running over the edge of her flesh like a bath with the taps left on. She was screaming out in bloody ecstasy. Janie could tell she was lost in some unending orgasm. She backed away. Diane was still rubbing her legs together, trying to maintain the feelings that she was embroiled in.

Janie dropped the knife to the floor, clattering on the hardwood boards. She picked up the rolling pin and looked at it. Her face contorted in horror. Disgust. The un-naturalness of it all. “I am so sorry,” she said quietly, as tears began to roll down her face. “So … sorry.” She stepped up to the bed and lifted the rolling pin like a bat. She took one last look into Diane’s eyes. She wasn’t in there. They were just staring back. Lustful.

Horny.

Janie smacked the rolling pin down into the centre of her face, wanting nothing more than for her pain to stop. That, and the look she was giving of a horny teenage boy wanking over a copy of Big Tits Monthly. There was a cracking sound as bone gave way to wood. Janie pulled the pin back up, not wanting to look at the damage. It was hard to remove from her face, like she was holding onto it. She slammed it down again. This time she saw. She didn’t mean to look. It was instinct. Diane’s nose had caved in from the first blow, the bone splintering out making the middle of her face look like a meteor site. When the second blow landed it went through the skull, into the mush beneath. Diane’s brain didn’t splatter out and loosh all over the bedroom like Janie expected. It wasn’t like the gnome incident from earlier.

Diane stopped moving. When her legs stopped, Janie was sure she'd finished moving, finally. She leaned over her. The rolling pin was stuck in her head, sticking out into the room. The smell up close was like shit blended warm with vomit. But it didn't smell like Donnie did. The smell of metal wasn't there. Janie looked at the mess inside Diane. Her brains looked like they had started some chemical reaction a while back. Solidifying.

Whatever this infection was, it was causing death pretty fucking quickly. Fucking or no fucking.

Then the smell and the sight overcame her, and Janie couldn't stop her cup of tea returning. She vomited over Diane's gaping face hole, filling the gaps with brown liquid, and weirdly, sweetcorn.

She didn't remember eating any sweetcorn recently.

C H A P T E R 1 7

Janie sat in the chair she had pulled up to the window. She was watching the street. There were dead bodies lying in the kerb. The gutter. Once they had died, they started to decompose with haste. She found she could watch them melting away over the hours.

After she'd closed the bedroom door on Diane's corpse, she hadn't looked again. She was sure the same thing was happening to her, but she didn't want to see it. She didn't need to. She was happy to know she wasn't in pain now. Or whatever the other feeling was.

The TV was running in the corner of the room. Blue screen. Nothing was transmitting. There was the radio still running in the kitchen, but it was silent. The man on there, the one who said he would keep transmitting … he'd stopped eventually. Janie could tell by the sounds after that he'd been taken by the infection.

She hadn't though. And she didn't know why. Still hadn't and so much time had passed. There didn't even seem to be any of them left in the streets now. They were all gone. Fucked themselves to death. Or not. Depending on which way you looked at it.

Janie stood, went to the kitchen. The radio was silent. The station was still transmitting, she thought. She poked around in the washing machine and found another clean set of clothes. A top—one of Diane's—that should fit better than the bloody, gooey, t-shirt she was wearing now, and a skirt. She went to the bathroom and washed.

Cleaning Diane from her.

She checked herself in the mirror. Still no rash. She didn't know why she'd been spared. What made her different. She dressed and went and made some food. Watched the street. She wasn't about to leave the safety of the pub without knowing that this disease had eaten them all away.

—

Two days after she'd ended Diane's suffering, Janie decided to leave the pub. She hadn't seen another living thing in those two days. She packed up a carrier bag with things that she might need. A knife. She had found a decent one. A torch. She'd dressed in clean clothes. Managed to fashion a

pair of walking shoes that were two sizes too big to fit her using extra socks as packing.

It had meant that she had needed to go into Diane's bedroom. The stench coming from the room, even before she'd opened the door, was rank. The room was leaking this stink of rotting tinned corn beef and vomit. She had opened the door and tried to find everything she needed to without looking at her on the bed.

But she had.

There was something that drew her to look. Just once.

Diane had melted away. It was like someone had poured acid over her and her skin had burned through, sliding from her bones, a rancid pool of gloop and gore wettened the bed, the floor beneath, seeping into the floorboards, down, into the pub below. And now, a couple of days later, it had jellified, leaving the look of the inside of a pork pie.

Janie had, of course, thrown up the contents of her stomach. It wasn't much—one of the reasons she was leaving now—and that had only added a battery acid flavour lingering in the mix.

She left the room with what she needed to leave the pub, vowing to never return to that room. Even if she needed to get back to the pub.

She took the keys from Donnie's dead body. The other corpse in the bar had decomposed in the same way that Diane had, but it didn't feel so bad to Janie, perhaps because she didn't know him. Either way, she prepared, and stepped out into the warm summer's day, carrier bag in one hand, kitchen knife in the other.

She half expected there to be a thousand of these sex zombies out there waiting. Hidden in the alleyways and front gardens to jump her—literally—as soon as she left the safety of the pub.

But nothing happened.

She walked quietly down the street, birds chirping like nothing was any different. Just a quiet summer's day. Closing her eyes she imagined that she could be in the middle of a field in Oxfordshire, alone, peaceful.

But all around her, the streets were littered with what remained of the corpses of the people. All of them. All except her. The people in the street had melted away, pooling into a human soup full of bones, some quicker

than others. There was a body just outside the pub doors. One that she couldn't see from the window inside. It was a man. He was rotting slower than most of the bodies that she had seen from inside the pub. Very promiscuous, obviously. But the birds had been at him.

What was left of his flesh had been pecked at, and pulled. Probably the same seagulls that attacked the black sacks of rubbish people used to put out in the street the day before the bin men were due.

Except instead of banana skins and kebab wrappings strewn to the side, it was innards, intestines. Bits of some blokes insides that a seagull couldn't gobble back without choking. They really were the rats of the sky. Anyone living near the seaside could tell you that.

Janie went over to the window of the Co-op. Somehow she'd always imagined that come the end of the world, the shops would all be looted like a nineties movie. The shop was untouched apart from the one display she could see that had toppled. Possibly when the infection had hit someone in there.

She'd come back later with a backpack and stock up on food.

After being outside for a while, she was satisfied that there was no one there. No horde of mindless sex fiends waiting to rape her until she died. Or they died. Whichever happened first.

Actually, most likely, both.

She headed back towards her flat. She may as well pick up her stuff.

CHAPTER 18

Janie kept her phone in her pocket the whole time. She checked it periodically. The signal would come and go, but she couldn't get a call to go through. She just got an intermittent buzzing sound out of the thing.

She stood in the door of her living room and looked at the corpses of Bobby and Lil. Well, she assumed it was them. They had melted into some blob of flesh and gristle, muscles visible, sinew hanging, frozen in the pinpoint in time where one, or the last of them had passed away.

Doing it doggy style.

She smiled. At least they both went doing what they enjoyed. The TV was still running a screen from the game that Bobby was playing. A demo-thing with a guy running around shooting everyone in the face. She took the remote from the sofa arm and flipped the channel back to one. A black screen. Something was still sending a signal, but there was no one there to say anything. She tossed the remote on the sofa next to the bodies and took the vodka bottle from the drinks cabinet, slurping from the neck.

She wasn't afraid to catch whatever it was now. If she was going to get it, she was sure she would have gotten it by now. No. God had deemed her to live in this purgatory now. Alone.

She chugged back some more of the vodka, taking down nearly a quarter of the bottle in one go. What did it matter if she got so shit faced she couldn't see? Going through into the bedroom she picked up her backpack from beside the door and packed a few clothes into it. She didn't need much.

The world was her oyster now.

And she wasn't going to stay there. She could go anywhere. Live anywhere. Why should she stay in this shithole? It stank of melting people, as much as anything else. A bolt of sickness stabbed at her gut. Again. It was happening way too often now, and she was beginning to think that there might be something really wrong with her.

"Is there anybody there?"

Janie froze to the spot, holding a dirty t-shirt half in and half out of the bag. Fuck. What if whoever it was, was a fucking nutter? She looked around the room for a weapon. Of course she had left the knife on the flap

of the drinks cabinet. She picked up the vodka bottle by the neck. It would have to do. She backed against the wall and kept still, silent.

"This is Penny Lancaster. I am broadcasting from the BBC building in London," the voice went on. Fucking hell. It was the TV. Janie dropped the bag and hurried to the living room, ignoring the copulating corpse statue. The TV signal had returned. There was a woman on there. She looked tired. Haggard, perhaps. Certainly not a news presenter. "Please, we've managed to get the signal running. Come to the BBC studio in Hackney. We're just outside of the tube station." She stopped. "Obviously that won't help. The phones are still working." She held her mobile up to the camera. "There's no reception on them, but the GPS's still work. There are more than thirty of us here. More coming. We're all women. There is no danger." She looked at the notes on the desk in front of her. "There are medical staff here. Everyone is …" she paused, looked unsure. "We don't know what happened. We don't know what caused it, but we have food. Supplies. Even if you don't know it yet the unaffected … we are all pregnant." She looked around unsure and someone off camera said something that Janie couldn't quiet hear. "We are all pregnant. If you are hearing this, then we believe that you are pregnant. Please. Come to the BBC studio in Hackney. If there are any men out there, even if you are unaffected, please do not approach the building. We will defend ourselves."

Janie put her hand over her belly and glanced over to Bobby. She assumed he was the glob of flesh at the back. "You're going to be a daddy," she said. She couldn't help but laugh. Fucking hell. What a way to find out.

"Please," the woman was still saying. "You are welcome here, and it is safe. We will continue this broadcast."

Janie raised her eyebrows. Hackney. Where the fuck in London was Hackney? There must also be other people—women—around here. The fucking estate was a baby factory. There must be survivors. Ones that didn't get killed by the infected. She went back to the bedroom and continued to pack her things.

It looked like she was going to have to learn how to drive a bus.

The End

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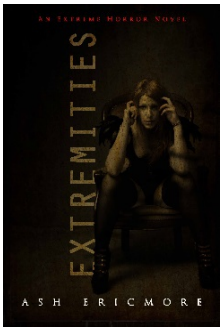
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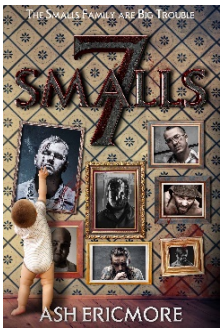
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